

THE KING COMES BACK



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NOVELS BY
VICTOR BRIDGES

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Greensea Island
The Man from Nowhere
The Cruise of the "Scandal"
Mr. Lyndon at Liberty
The Lady from Longacre
The Secret of the Creek



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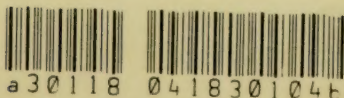
THE KING COMES BACK

By
VICTOR BRIDGES

Author of

THE MAN FROM NOWHERE
MR. LYNDON AT LIBERTY
THE CRUISE OF THE "SCANDAL"
THE LADY FROM LONGACRE
GREENSEA ISLAND
THE RED LODGE
THE GIRL IN BLACK
THE SECRET OF THE CREEK

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON
MCMXXX



Made *and* Printed in Great Britain
By The Camelot Press Ltd
London *and* Southampton

To
MARGARET



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*Will ye no come back again?
Will ye no come back again?
Better lo'ed ye canna be.
Will ye no come back again?*

CHAPTER I

BANG!!

The back wheel gave a violent skid, and before I knew what was happening I had fetched up with a crash against the opposite bank. The next instant I was sprawling full length in the road, with what remained of the bicycle lying peacefully beside me.

It took me a moment or two to realise that I was still alive; then, struggling painfully to my feet, I stood there in the white dust and the blazing sunshine looking down ruefully at the wreckage.

“Damn!” I said with some bitterness.

Ungrateful as it was, considering how narrowly I had escaped death, that simple homely expression did me a deal of good. Somehow or other it seemed to relieve my feelings immensely, and, recovering my hat, which had rolled away into the gutter, I caught hold of the damaged machine by the handle-bars and hoisted it up from its recumbent position.

It needed no expert eye to see that any attempt at repairs would be altogether fantastic. There was a gaping rent in the back tyre which exposed

a large portion of the inner tube, while the front wheel was so hopelessly buckled that, with its trailing spokes and general air of dissipation, it reminded me of a discarded umbrella. If I succeeded in getting to Monte Carlo that evening it would certainly not be in the rôle of a motorcyclist.

With some difficulty I hauled the wretched thing across the road, and propped it up against the trunk of an olive-tree. All I could do was to wait patiently until some friendly Samaritan came along who would either give me a lift or else take a message to the nearest garage. At the worst it was not likely to be a very long vigil, and, with this consoling reflection, I brushed down my clothes and, lighting a cigarette, seated myself on a neighbouring stump.

In one way at least Fate had been kind to me. As far as the beauty of the scenery was concerned I could hardly have selected a more attractive place in which to stage my accident. On the landward side the ragged peaks of the Alpes Maritimes towered up into the cloudless sky, while on the other, a vine-clad slope, with a little stream meandering through its midst, ran gently down to the blue waters of the Mediterranean. Close to the shore, half hidden behind

a cluster of cypresses and palms, rose the white walls of a small secluded villa.

After six dreary months in the wildest part of Patagonia, this riot of sunshine and colour was altogether to my taste. Despite my temporary disaster, I more than ever blessed the happy inspiration which had prompted me to leave the ship at Toulon and treat myself to a three weeks' holiday before returning to England. What I wanted, and what I had most certainly earned, was a short spell of luxurious amusement, and, out of season though it was, Monte Carlo, with its warmth, its lights, its pretty women, and its good food, seemed just about the right place to gratify that craving.

I was looking at the villa, and wondering idly who its lucky owner might be, when my speculations were abruptly disturbed by a violent outbreak of snarls and growls. They seemed to come from the direction of the stream, and, jumping to my feet, I caught sight of the slim figure of a girl running quickly along the bank.

Like most people who have already attempted the feat, I have no particular partiality for interfering in dog fights. There are times, however, when the less agreeable duties of life can hardly be avoided, and, since this was obviously one of

those awkward occasions, I threw away my cigarette and started off hastily down the slope.

Dodging in and out between the vines, I emerged suddenly on the scene of combat. It was a level patch of ground within a yard or two of the bank, in the centre of which a desperate battle was in progress. One of the contestants, a large, powerful-looking Alsatian wolf-hound, was savagely endeavouring to fix his teeth in the throat of his adversary, while the latter, a small grey rough-haired terrier, covered in blood, still fought and struggled with extraordinary game-ness. Right in the midst of the *mêlée* stood the girl whom I had seen running to the rescue. She had gripped the big dog by the back of the neck, and, heedless of his snapping jaws and furious growls, was making a frantic attempt to drag him from his victim.

In my excitement I quite forgot where I was.

"It's all right," I shouted, rushing forward, "you leave him to me!"

Whether she heard it or not, my advice was superfluous, for, just as I reached the spot, her captive wrenched himself free. In a flash he was again on top of the terrier, but before he could finish his job I had grabbed him by the scruff of

the neck with one hand, and was squeezing his windpipe with the other.

Strong as he was, and furiously as he writhed and twisted, I managed to keep my grip until the pressure had done its work. With immense relief I felt his big body gradually beginning to sag, and, seizing the chance, I hauled him back step by step until we were within a few feet of the edge of the stream. One final heave and he was scrabbling about wildly in the shallow water, the most surprised and breathless dog in the whole of the South of France.

So far the victory was with me, but any elation I might have felt was promptly damped by the extraordinary quickness with which the brute recovered. The shock and indignity of his unexpected bath evidently acted on him like a tonic, and in less time than it takes to write the words he had floundered ashore on the opposite bank, and was glaring at me malevolently, as though meditating a fresh attack.

I stooped down and picked up a stone.

"Go home, Harold," I said, "lest worse befall you."

For a moment (a painfully long moment it seemed) the issue appeared to be in doubt. Then I took a pace forward, and with a sudden

venomous snarl he tucked his tail in between his legs and disappeared rapidly among the bushes.

The episode being, so to speak, closed, I turned round to look for the girl. She was sitting on the ground with the terrier on her lap, talking to him and comforting him as though he were a distressed baby. As I approached she raised her eyes, and I realised for the first time how extraordinarily pretty she was.

"I am so grateful to you, monsieur," she exclaimed in English. "Except for you, my little Peter would be dead."

I took off my hat. "I hope he isn't much hurt," I said.

"I think it is only his paw," she replied. "It bleeds terribly. There is a great hole where that savage bit him."

"Can I have a look at it?" I suggested. "He won't mind as long as you go on stroking and petting him."

Without waiting for her permission, I dropped down alongside of her, and after a few friendly advances I succeeded in persuading the patient to allow me to examine his injury. From the way he was holding it I thought at first that the leg was broken, but on closer inspection this fear proved to be groundless. All the same, it was

an ugly bite, which certainly looked as though it would be none the worse for being bandaged, so, pulling out my handkerchief, I promptly set about the job.

“There you are, Peter,” I said, giving him a final pat. “Now all you’ve got to do is to be a good dog and not tear it off.”

He licked my hand as though to express his gratitude, and with a sudden little laugh the girl picked him up and hugged him in her arms.

“I don’t know how to thank you, monsieur,” she said again. “I only hope that when Peter and I are in trouble we shall always find someone as kind as you to help us.”

She looked so charming, with her violet blue eyes and slightly parted lips, that it was all I could do not to lean forward and kiss her.

“I’m awfully glad I happened to be around,” I said. “Where did that brute come from, and why did he go for Peter in that bloodthirsty way?”

She shook her head. “I do not know. It was all so sudden. We were taking a little walk, and he rushed out at us from among the vines. Instead of running away, Peter just stood and fought with him. He is like you ; he is very brave.”

I did my best not to blush. “Is that your

home?" I asked, "that pretty little villa down there by the sea?"

"It belongs to my uncle," she replied. "I am staying with him for the present." She paused, and then added half shyly, "And you, monsieur—do you also live in this neighbourhood?"

"Not exactly," I said. "As a matter of fact, I'm on my way to Monte Carlo."

"Monte Carlo!" she repeated. "You are going to stay there?"

"Just for a week or so," I returned. "I am putting up at the Hôtel Moderne. I've been working rather hard the last few months and I want a little holiday."

"Then it is more than possible we shall see each other again," she said smilingly. "I often drive in with my uncle and my cousin, and sometimes after dinner we sit on the terrace and listen to the band. Perhaps you would care to know how my poor Peter is?"

"I should love to," I said with some enthusiasm. "By the way, the best thing you can do for him is to bathe that place every two or three hours with warm water and boracic. If you will allow me to, I will send you out a packet as soon as I get to Monte Carlo."

"But there is no need to trouble you," she replied. "My uncle is going there this evening, and I will ask him to buy some and bring it back with him."

I was on the point of replying when my attention was attracted by a small bright object which was lying on the ground a few feet away from where we were sitting. Wondering what it could be, I leaned over towards it, and as I picked it up I saw that it was a tiny silver trinket, fashioned in the shape of a Maltese cross.

"Hullo!" I said, holding it out. "Is this yours?"

My companion glanced at the bracelet which she was wearing on her left wrist.

"Yes," she said. "It must have come off while I was trying to help Peter." She was about to take it when with a sudden impulsive movement she drew back. "Will you not keep it, monsieur, just as a little souvenir from him?"

"That's very kind and charming of Peter," I said. "I'll wear it on my watch-chain, and then, if we do meet, you'll be able to recognise me."

She laughed. "And how am I to address you?" she asked. "You see, at present I do not even know your name."

"My name's Brandon," I replied. "Richard
BB

Brandon. When I like people very much I allow them to call me Dick." I paused. "What's yours?" I inquired.

As the question left my lips there was a sound of footsteps and voices. I looked up quickly, and at the same moment two men came into view round a bend in the path which led up from the villa. At the sight of them my companion gave a little half-startled exclamation.

"It is my uncle," she said. "My uncle and my cousin Ivan."

She jumped up, still holding Peter in her arms, and, having put away the cross in my pocket, I proceeded to follow her example.

"You will pardon me for one moment," she continued. "They do not speak English, so I will explain to them what has happened. I am sure that they will wish to thank you."

By this time the new arrivals were not more than twenty yards away, and from the higher ground on which we were standing I was able to get a good view of them both.

The elder of the two was a man of about sixty—a gaunt, sallow, sinister-looking gentleman, with thin lips and an obviously dyed moustache. He had a long scar running down from his right temple to the corner of his mouth, and he walked

with a slight limp, as though one leg were a trifle shorter than the other.

Little as he appealed to my taste, I was even less attracted by his son. "Cousin Ivan," indeed, seemed to me one of the most unlikeable people that I had ever set eyes on. A massively built fellow, with a bull neck and a stupid, sullen face, he yet succeeded in conveying an impression of truculent swagger which made me long to kick him.

It was the behaviour of the two men, however, rather than their personal appearance, which chiefly attracted my attention. Instead of continuing their advance, they both came to a sudden halt at the top of the path, where they stood staring at me intently and muttering to each other in an excited undertone.

I was too far away to hear what they were saying, but from the murmur of their voices it struck me at once that they were talking in German. Even at that distance it was a point on which I was not likely to be mistaken, for, having spent three years in Heidelberg as a student, I am almost as familiar with the language as though I were a native of the country.

Before I had time to make any further discoveries they were joined by the girl, who had

hurried forward to meet them. A brief but animated conversation followed, in which Cousin Ivan appeared to play the part of a listener, and then, turning round in a group, all three of them started to walk towards me. It was the elder of the two men who was the first to speak.

"My niece has informed me of your brave conduct in coming to her assistance," he said in rather bad French. "Both my son and myself are anxious to express our gratitude."

He bowed gravely, and, clicking his heels together, Cousin Ivan imitated his example.

"I am afraid that mademoiselle has been flattering me," I replied in the same language. "I only pulled away a dog that was trying to bite Peter."

"If it had not been for Mr. Brandon," broke in the girl, "Peter would most certainly have been killed."

"We are, as I say, greatly indebted to you," repeated her uncle. "I understand, monsieur, that you are an Englishman."

"Partly English," I corrected him, "and partly Irish."

He bowed again. "An excellent mixture, according to the historians. My niece also tells me that you are about to visit Monte Carlo."

"That was my intention when I left Toulon," I admitted.

"And may I inquire whether you intend to stay for any length of time?"

It struck me that he was becoming a trifle inquisitive, but, having no wish to quarrel with the possessor of such a charming niece, I contented myself with a shrug.

"Oh, I don't know," I said carelessly. "I haven't really decided yet. It all depends upon whether I can manage to enjoy myself."

He made a sort of doubtful gesture with his hands. "I fear greatly that you will be disappointed. Most of the shops and hotels are closed at this time of year, and the only people one meets in the Casino are small shopkeepers and tradesmen from Lyons. There are other places—Mentone, for instance—which I think you would find considerably more attractive."

Cousin Ivan nodded his approval. "That is so," he said in a harsh guttural voice. "For myself, I much prefer Mentone."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him why the devil he didn't go there, when the girl, who had been looking in a slightly puzzled way from one to the other of them, suddenly broke into the conversation.

"I do not think that we need be anxious about Mr. Brandon," she remarked. "From what I have seen of him I should say that he is very well able to take care of himself."

"But certainly," agreed her uncle soothingly. "All I am concerned for is that his stay here shall be as pleasant as possible." He turned back and addressed himself to me. "You will pardon us if we are compelled to leave you, but unfortunately my niece is needed at the villa. We have just had news that some friends are about to visit us."

For one moment the girl seemed to be on the point of protesting; then, as if wishful to avoid anything approaching a scene, she stepped forward and held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Brandon," she said in English. "If you decide to stay at Monte Carlo, perhaps after all you will not find it so dull as my uncle fears."

I bent down and kissed the tips of her fingers.

"On that point, mademoiselle," I said, "I have already made up my mind."

I bowed to the two men, who returned my salutation stiffly, and then, making no attempt to move, I stood there hat in hand watching them descend the path. As they disappeared round the

bend, the girl looked back for an instant and waved her hand.

"You're a perfect darling," I said softly, "but I hate your relations."

CHAPTER II

PULLING up in response to my hail, the driver of the lorry looked down at me inquiringly. He was a big, bearded man with a rather vacant expression.

"I am sorry to have stopped you," I said in my best French, "but, as you see, I am in need of help."

He stared at the shattered bicycle, which was still leaning against the trunk of the olive-tree.

"Monsieur has had an accident," he observed.

"Precisely," I replied. "Monsieur has run into the bank and smashed his front wheel. He is therefore unable to proceed to Monte Carlo."

At the mention of the name Monte Carlo, his face brightened.

"But it is the very place to which I am going," he announced. "If monsieur is looking for a conveyance, there would be room in my lorry

both for him and his bicycle." He paused.

"As to the matter of payment——"

"I'll give you a hundred francs," I said.

"It is not a great sum," he remarked a little sadly.

"It is not a great distance," I pointed out.

Having apparently no satisfactory answer to this retort, he lapsed into silence, and, assuming that my offer was accepted, I hoisted the bicycle up over the side, and clambered in after it. I found myself in company with a mixed cargo, which consisted of a dead pig, half a dozen crates of live fowls, and two or three assorted heaps of vegetables. As the best available form of accommodation, I selected a pile of turnips which were stowed away in one corner. Though not really comfortable, it had the advantage of being as far away from the pig as circumstances would allow, and, in this primitive if somewhat undignified fashion, I resumed my interrupted journey.

My recent adventure had at least furnished me with sufficient material to occupy my thoughts. Whoever Peter's mistress might be, there was no getting away from the fact that, considering the brevity of our acquaintance, I was already absurdly in love with her. I don't think that, as

healthy young men go, I am unusually susceptible, but from the first moment when she had looked up at me with those delightful eyes of hers, I had been overcome by a sort of gay intoxication, for which there seemed to be no other adequate solution.

My ignorance of her name only invested the affair with an additional romance. She was certainly not French or English, while the mere fact that her uncle and her cousin chose to converse in German was, after all, no convincing proof that that was their native tongue.

There were several things indeed about both those gentlemen which filled me with an active curiosity. Why had they stopped and stared at me in that extraordinary fashion, why hadn't they introduced themselves like reasonable people, and why above all had the elder made that obvious and somewhat clumsy effort to put me off my intention of staying at Monte Carlo?

The only explanation I could think of was that he objected to my friendship with his niece. Whether he had taken a dislike to the cut of my trousers or whether he had some special reason for hating Englishmen it was impossible to say. His attitude towards me, however, had been

plain enough, and, judging by that, the farther and more promptly I removed myself from the neighbourhood, the better I should be fitting in with his own personal tastes.

It was not a reflection which was very flattering to my vanity, but at the same time there were certain compensations. Unless I were wrong, the girl herself had been far from endorsing the opinion of her relatives. She had, on the contrary, shown distinct signs of surprise and indignation at their behaviour, and I felt more convinced than ever that it was only a natural desire to avoid further unpleasantness which had prevented her from giving expression to her feelings.

If that were really the case, it seemed to me that, taking it all round, there was not very much to complain about. From what I had seen of Cousin Ivan and his papa I had no wish to improve my acquaintance with either of them, while, granted a little enterprise on my part, it would be strange indeed if, in the course of the next few days, I failed to find some opportunity of inquiring after the welfare of Peter.

I was still pondering over this agreeable prospect as we trundled past the outlying villas which decorate the hillside at Monaco. It was about

six o'clock in the evening, and down below us in a pool of sunshine lay a brightly coloured panorama of roofs and gardens. I could see the cupolas of the Casino standing out against the blue sky, and from somewhere in the same direction came the distant strains of a gay Hungarian waltz. For a tired mining engineer in search of a holiday I was disposed to think that I had chosen wisely.

Rising from my seat, and stepping delicately over the pig, I asked the driver if he could put me down at a garage. He replied in the affirmative, and a few minutes later he pulled up in front of a garish-looking structure, where a curly-haired person in overalls was lounging gracefully in the doorway. I beckoned to him from the lorry, and with a responsive smile he sauntered forward across the pavement.

"It is an English gentleman," observed the driver. "He has broken his bicycle and desires that it should be mended."

The other favoured me with a bow.

"I am at your sairvice, signor. You come to what you say de right shop—yes. For me, I am Italian, but I speaka de Ingles."

"Well, freeze on to this, George," I suggested, and, hauling up the machine from its resting-place

among the chickens, I dragged it to the side and lowered it into his arms.

Jumping out myself and presenting the driver with his hundred francs, I then proceeded to explain my requirements.

"I want to know what it will cost to put this mess right," I said. "If you'll have a look at it to-night, I'll call round in the morning. Brandon is my name, and I'm staying at the Hôtel Moderne."

Assisted by a subordinate, who had emerged languidly from the doorway, my new friend deposited the bicycle against the garage wall. Then, wiping his fingers on the back of his trousers, he accepted the visiting card which I had produced from my pocket.

"Noocha bad smash—eh?" he remarked cheerfully. "De signor may be tankful 'e not breaka de neck."

"The signor is extremely thankful," I admitted. "He would be still further obliged if you would show him the nearest way to his hotel."

He waved his hand towards a dilapidated car which was standing in the roadway.

"You jumpa in. For twenty-five franc I taka you dere myself."

There was a generosity in his voice which convinced me that the charge was extortionate, but, being badly in need of a bath and a change of clothes, I was in no mood to worry over trifles. I felt, too, that, however expensive the ride might be, it was at least a more dignified way of arriving than on top of a pile of turnips, so, without attempting to haggle about terms, I promptly accepted his offer.

On the advice of a fellow-passenger I had booked a room at the Moderne by telephone before leaving Toulon. I had no idea what the place was like, apart from his recommendation, and I was therefore agreeably surprised when, after about five minutes' driving, he pulled up at a pleasant palm-shaded building, with a broad verandah running the full length of its front. It stood in its own grounds, about half-way up the hill, and its top windows looked down over the harbour.

A stout and voluble lady, who was in charge of the office when I entered, informed me that my trunk, which I had sent on by train from Toulon, had already arrived. She handed me over to the care of a microscopic pageboy, and, ascending to the third floor, I was shown into a large airy apartment, with long French windows

opening out on to a balcony. It was furnished, much to my satisfaction, with a full-size double bed, while, to crown its other merits, it had in addition a small bathroom attached to it.

Half an hour later, cool, refreshed, and dressed in a nice clean suit of white duck, I strolled across the road and entered the public gardens which ran down towards the Casino. It was a beautiful evening, and, although I was beginning to feel a certain craving for nourishment, the prospect of a little preliminary saunter was too tempting to be resisted. I thought I would drop in at the Café de Paris and treat myself to an *apéritif*, after which I could either return to my hotel or else dine comfortably at some restaurant in the town.

When I arrived at that famous resort I found most of the tables on the lawn already occupied. The visitors, however, were of a very different class from the picturesque throng of celebrities and crooks who are generally *en évidence* in January. They consisted for the most part of cheerful-looking middle-class French people, the majority of whom had evidently come South more for the purpose of enjoying a summer holiday than with any feverish desire to gamble away their hard-earned savings.

I was standing there, looking around for a vacant seat, when suddenly, to my intense amazement, I caught sight of Charles. He was lounging in solitary state at one of the farther tables—a pipe in his mouth and his long legs stretched out in front of him. So staggering was the shock that for a moment I could scarcely believe my eyes : then, pulling myself together, I walked up quietly behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hullo, Charles !” I said. “What the devil are you doing here ?”

At the touch of my hand he swung round abruptly, and the tumbler which was standing at his elbow went over with a crash.

“Well, I’m damned !” he exclaimed. “If it isn’t Dick Brandon !”

I removed a splinter of glass from the adjoining chair, and sat down opposite him.

“I thought I’d better come over and speak to you,” I said. “I didn’t know if you’d recognise me with a moustache.”

“Where in the name of thunder have you sprung from ?” he demanded. “When I saw you last you were just off to Patagonia to inspect mines.”

“Well, I’ve inspected them,” I said. “I’ve

been trailing around that cursed country for the last six months, and a very tiring and unpleasant job it was."

He sat back, staring at me half incredulously.

"When did you get here?" he asked.

"About half an hour ago," I replied. "I left the ship at Toulon and came along on a motor-bike."

There was a brief pause.

"It's the sort of thing that makes one believe in Providence," said Charles slowly. "I was just feeling that I'd give my left ear for somebody to talk to and—— Hi! Garçon!" He beckoned to a passing waiter, who swerved obediently in our direction. "You speak French," he added. "Tell him we want a bottle of fizz—the best they've got."

I translated the order to the waiter, who, gathering up the fragments of the tumbler, flitted off on his errand.

"And now, Charles," I said, "perhaps you'll be kind enough to answer my question. What the blazes are you doing out here when by all the laws of God and man you ought to be up at St. Andrews?"

He shifted a little restlessly in his chair. "If you don't mind, Dick, we won't discuss golf.

It's the one thing I'm trying not to think about."

"But, hang it all!" I protested; "it's the only thing you can think about."

"Ah," he said, "you don't know, of course. You haven't been seeing the papers."

"What have the papers got to do with it?" I inquired.

"Why, ever since March I've been playing like a perfect mutt. I can't drive, I can't putt, I can't do a single damned shot. In the first round of the Amateur Championship I was beaten by a stockbroker from Cardiff!"

He brought out the last three words with an indescribable bitterness.

"A stockbroker from Cardiff!" I repeated. "My dear Charles, you ought to see a doctor."

"I've seen one," he replied gloomily. "I went to old Campbell in Harley Street, and, after pulling me about and punching me all over, he said that what I wanted was a complete rest. Told me that I mustn't touch a club for at least six weeks."

I gave an involuntary whistle. "Good Lord!" I said. "It's like asking a drunkard to sign the pledge."

"It was a bit of a knock," admitted Charles. "Still, when a man's playing the sort of stuff I
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was, something pretty drastic's got to be done about it. Of course, it was no use trying to stop in Town with fellows keeping on ringing up and asking me to have a game, so I just made up my mind to chuck the whole show and put in a couple of months motoring about the Continent."

We were interrupted at this point by the appearance of the champagne—a 1921 Krug cooled to exactly the right temperature.

"And how's the prescription working?" I asked, as the waiter took his departure.

"Rottenly," said Charles. "It may be my fault, but somehow or other I've never had much use for foreigners. I've been so bored sitting around doing nothing, that when you blew in just now I could have got up and shouted." He helped himself to a long drink, and, smacking his lips appreciatively, refilled the glass. "I don't know what your plans are, Dick," he continued, "but if you've a spark of decent feeling left in you you're going to stop here as my guest."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," I replied firmly.

His face fell. "Why not?"

"Well, in the first place," I said, "because I'm rolling in money. I've made five hundred

pounds out of this job and I can jolly well afford to pay for myself. Besides," I added, as he was about to protest, "it would be an impossible state of affairs. If I accepted your hospitality I should have to be polite to you."

He knocked out his pipe, grinning amiably.

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

"At the Moderne," I said. "You'd better come back and have some food."

He shook his head. "No sense in lugging all the way up there. I'm just across the road at the Hôtel de Paris, and I've got a table reserved for me on the balcony. We can dine there comfortably and then, if we like, we can shove along to the Casino and listen to the band."

"That will suit me beautifully," I said.

CHAPTER III

CHARLES swallowed the last morsel of his rum omelette, and looked up with a contented expression.

"There's one thing about these wretched Frenchmen," he observed, "they certainly can cook."

"Don't talk so loud," I said, "or some of them will be getting conceited."

He produced a large silver cigar-case from his pocket, and, helping himself, handed it to me across the table.

"I'm quite beginning to like this place, now you've come," he continued. "It's wonderful what a difference it makes having somebody to talk to."

"How long are you thinking of staying?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't mind. If there's anywhere else you'd rather go to, we'll push off at once."

"On the contrary," I said, "I've a particular reason for wanting to stop here."

He eyed me inquiringly. "What sort of a reason?"

"Well, it sounds funny," I admitted, "but, as a matter of fact, I've promised to see a girl about a dog."

There was a moment's pause.

"Go ahead," said Charles kindly. "I'll buy it."

"It's not a joke," I explained. "I had rather an interesting adventure coming here this afternoon. If you'll give me a match, I'll tell you all about it."

He passed me the box, and, lighting my cigar, I proceeded to describe my dramatic meeting with Peter's mistress and the remarkable behaviour of her uncle and her cousin.

"I can't imagine why they were so upset," I concluded, "and, what's more, I don't care. I only know that the girl is perfectly charming, and that I'm damned well going to see her again, whether they like it or not."

Charles grinned sympathetically. "That's the right spirit," he remarked. "When you run across something attractive, it's no use being put off by her relations. They're sure to be impossible, anyway."

"The oddest thing about them," I went on, "is the fact that they were talking to each other in German. If that's their native language, what are they doing down here in a French villa?"

"Lord knows," was his reply. "Perhaps they're Russian refugees. You find them everywhere nowadays, and most of them can talk half a dozen languages." He paused. "I wish I had your luck," he added. "If I interfered in a dog fight I should merely get bitten."

"Well, it would be worth it," I returned. "Anyone would risk a touch of hydrophobia for the sake of a girl like that."

We sat on talking and smoking in the gathering dusk, while a sickle-shaped moon mounted up slowly out of the sea, and twinkling points of light began to appear along the hillside. In the square beneath us, carriages and motors were arriving at the entrance to the Casino, each one discharging a group of gaily dressed visitors whose laughter and chatter mingled with the strains of the band.

“How do you feel about it, Charles?” I suggested at last. “Shall we tootle across and lose a few francs?”

“Right you are,” he said, pushing back his chair. “I don’t suppose I shall stop very long myself. The place is so devilish stuffy, and there’s a reek of scent that nearly knocks one over.”

“I’ll keep an eye on you,” I said encouragingly. “If I see you turning pale, we’ll go out and sit on the terrace.”

.

Considering the time of year, I was a little surprised at the crowd of people who met my eyes as we entered the large main room. Five tables were in full swing, most of the seats being occupied by determined-looking ladies. Round each of them clustered the usual fringe of absorbed

spectators, while the click of the balls and the monotonous voices of the croupiers bore evidence to the business that was being transacted.

We bought some counters, and, after wandering about for a bit, I managed to secure a vacant place. A hundred francs was the total extent to which I had determined to plunge, and, with the idea of extracting full value out of my capital, I restricted my wagers to not more than ten francs at a time. Cowardly as the system was, it at least enabled me to avert bankruptcy for the best part of a quarter of an hour. At the end of that period, however, the crash came, and, with a resigned sigh, I turned to Charles, who had been standing by and jeering at my efforts.

"I think I've had enough excitement for to-night," I remarked. "Let's go out into the garden and drink beer."

He nodded approvingly, and we were moving away towards the doors of the terrace when we noticed a large and particularly animated audience at one of the adjoining tables.

"Hullo!" said Charles. "What's on here? Looks to me as if somebody was making a few quid."

"I'd like to see how it's done," I admitted

enviously, and, postponing our proposed departure, we strolled across to investigate the excitement.

I could see at once, as I peered over the heads of the people in front of me, that the principal object of attention was a young man who was sitting next to one of the croupiers. He was a tall, genial-looking young man with close-cropped curly hair, and, judging by the number of counters which were stacked in front of him, he seemed to have been gambling with considerable success.

I had just grasped the fact that there was something curiously familiar about his face when I felt myself gripped tightly by the arm.

"Holy Moses!" muttered Charles, in a startled whisper. "If it wasn't for that moustache of yours, you'd be as like as two peas!"

For a moment I stood stock still, staring across the table. I suppose nobody quite realises how they appear to other people, but, unless every mirror before which I had shaved or brushed my hair was astoundingly deceptive, there was no doubt that Charles had spoken the truth. The man who sat there collecting his winnings, and piling them up casually in heaps, was an almost exact double of myself.

With a queer feeling, which it would be difficult to describe in words, I stepped back out of the crowd.

"This has got to be looked into, Charles," I said. "It's a clear case of infringement of birth-right."

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

"Find out his name, to begin with," I replied. I glanced round, and a few paces from us I saw one of those impassive gentlemen in livery who assist in preserving the decorum of the Rooms. "That chap will probably know," I said. "You stroll over and have a talk to him. I don't want to do it myself, or he may spot the likeness."

Charles moved off obediently to where the attendant was standing, and, discovering a deserted couch in the corner, I sat down and waited for his report. When he rejoined me, after a few minutes' conversation, I could see by his face that his errand had been successful.

"Come along," he said, jerking his head towards the door. "I can't talk in this infernal heat; it's enough to poison an alligator."

We made our way out on to the brightly lit terrace, where a number of people were sipping their drinks and listening to the band. It was a

beautiful clear night, without a breath of wind, and the sea lay below us like a sheet of dark blue glass.

"I've discovered who he is," said Charles, as we took our places at a vacant table. "His name's Schönborn, and he's living at a place called the Villa d'Or."

"Schönborn!" I repeated. "He looks extraordinarily English to have a name like that."

"His clothes are English, anyhow," agreed Charles. "I noticed them specially, and I'll bet a fiver they come from Bond Street or Savile Row."

"Did you find out anything else?" I asked.

"Well, I gather that he's a bit of a lad. He turned up here about ten days ago, and apparently he's been having a pretty hectic time of it. The fellow I was talking to told me that since he started playing to-night he'd won over three thousand pounds."

"That's the sort of double I like," I said. "If there wasn't such a crowd round the table, I'd go back and introduce myself."

"There's no hurry," said Charles. "We're bound to run across him again. As a matter of fact, the Villa d'Or is just at the top of the gardens, quite close to your hotel."

“Then they’ll probably know something about him there,” I said. “I’ll have a chat with the hall porter in the morning, and if he reports favourably——”

I broke off in the middle of the sentence, and for a moment Mr. Schönborn and his affairs went clean out of my head.

“What’s up now?” demanded Charles.

“Do you see those two men coming down the steps?” I asked: “the big swaggering lout and the chap with the limp?”

He nodded. “Yes—are they friends of yours?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “That’s Cousin Ivan and his papa—the two beauties I was telling you about at dinner.”

Sitting up abruptly, Charles treated himself to a long, critical stare.

“Well, I’d hate to hurt your feelings,” he remarked, “but if your girl’s anything like them——”

“Don’t be facetious,” I interrupted. “Just have a good look and tell me what you think of them.”

“I should put them down as a couple of crooks,” was his unhesitating reply.

I sat silent while the pair crossed the terrace,

and, without even glancing in our direction, established themselves at a table almost in front of the band-stand. I saw the elder man give an order to the waiter, and then, moving his chair a little closer to the other, he leaned sideways and began to talk.

"I wonder what they've done with the niece," I said. "Left her at the Villa, I suppose."

"That's it," replied Charles, with a slight yawn. "They'll probably keep her chained up in the bathroom until they've made certain that you've left the town." He pulled out his watch and glanced at the time. "A quarter past ten," he added. "I don't know how you feel about it, but I think I shall push off as soon as I've had another drink."

I stopped a waiter who was hurrying towards the buffet and told him to bring us some beer.

"It's too early to turn in yet," I objected. "One can't go to bed in Monte Carlo at this unholy hour."

"I can," said Charles. "There was a damned mosquito in my room last night, and the brute kept me awake till nearly two o'clock."

"I noticed you were looking a bit exhausted," I said.

“Of course,” he continued unselfishly, “if you think you’ll feel bored——”

I shook my head. “Don’t you worry about me,” I replied. “I shall be quite amused watching our two pals.”

.

Of the various strange ties that bind men together in this world, few seem to be more lasting than the fact of having been friends at school. My acquaintance with Charles dated back to our first term at Haileybury, where, as two forlorn new boys, we had struck up an alliance which had triumphantly survived through all the chances and changes of thirteen years. It was a friendship that was the more remarkable considering how widely apart our different paths had lain. While I had been studying abroad and then wandering about the world in my capacity as a mining engineer, Charles, after stepping into a disgraceful amount of money on his twenty-first birthday, had dedicated his entire life to the arduous task of becoming a plus four golfer. In spite of this handicap, he had preserved all the cheerful and good-natured traits which had characterised him at school, and during my rare visits to England his hospitable little flat in St. James’s Square had generally been my headquarters.

To have run across him out here, just when I was in need of a congenial companion, was a stroke of luck which seemed almost too good to be true. Except for the distressing humiliations I endured when he insisted on dragging me round a golf course, nothing had ever marred the harmony of our relations, and now, at all events for the remainder of his "cure," even that painful ordeal was no longer to be dreaded.

In the secluded corner to which I had shifted my seat after his departure, I sat sipping my beer and brooding over my good fortune. From my new position I could still keep an eye on the table by the band-stand, and my interest in its two occupants was in no way lessened when I observed a third man stroll up to where they were sitting and slip quietly into the vacant seat beside them. He was a tall, rather shabbily dressed individual with a singularly unprepossessing face.

I was watching him leaning forward and whispering to the other two, when I suddenly noticed that all three of them had half turned their heads, and were staring furtively in the direction of the Casino. I glanced across to see what had attracted their attention, and there, just emerging from the door, accompanied by a

couple of somewhat highly coloured ladies, came the triumphant figure of Mr. Schönborn.

Making their way hilariously through the throng, the trio seated themselves at the table which Charles and I had recently vacated. They were followed by an obsequious waiter, who, having evidently marked them down as a promising quarry, was determined that no one else should trespass upon his preserves. That he was a man of discernment was soon proved by his returning with a magnum of champagne, and by the almost reverential air with which he pocketed the note that my double carelessly tossed to him.

So absorbed had I been in these transactions that for some minutes the little party by the bandstand had altogether escaped my attention. Glancing unobtrusively round, I discovered that I was not the only one for whom Mr. Schönborn possessed a strong fascination. All three of them were watching his proceedings with a stealthy but unmistakable interest. It was something quite different from mere idle curiosity, and for the first time a possible solution of the mysterious behaviour of Cousin Ivan and his papa at our previous meeting suddenly flashed across my mind.

If they knew Mr. Schönborn, as apparently

they did, it was not surprising that they should have been momentarily staggered by the extraordinary resemblance between us. It would account not only for their suspicious looks and their muttered conversation, but it would also go some way towards explaining why they had been so distressingly anxious to get me out of the district. Whatever game they might be up to in connection with our mutual friend, my presence in the town could hardly fail to prove an awkward and embarrassing complication.

With a pleasant feeling that the situation was becoming distinctly intriguing, I again turned my head in the direction of the other table. I could see at once that, as far as the magnum of champagne was concerned, its occupants had been putting in some remarkably useful work. Judging by appearances, indeed, Mr. Schönborn was what you might call "well away." He was leaning back in his chair gently waving his cigar in time to the music, while his two companions, both of whom were talking simultaneously, seemed to be competing with each other for the honour of his attention.

Thanks to the shelter of an overhanging palm, I was able to study my double in comparative security. The longer I inspected him the more I

realised how astoundingly alike we were. Except for his being clean shaven, the only difference I could detect was the fact that I was undoubtedly in better condition. For a man of his age he looked a trifle soft, and there was a slight puffiness beneath his eyes which suggested that champagne and female society were by no means an uncommon feature in his daily routine.

Since he was obviously celebrating his good luck, I fully expected that he would remain where he was until the band had concluded its programme. I was therefore taken rather by surprise when, without the slightest warning, he suddenly pushed back his chair and, making some observation to his two companions, rose a little unsteadily to his feet.

My emotion was evidently shared by the ladies, both of whom, as I could see by their gestures, promptly broke into a voluble protest. One of them, indeed, went so far as to attempt to pull him back into his seat—a familiarity which Mr. Schönborn repelled by unceremoniously shaking her off. Then, apparently quite unperturbed by this *contretemps*, he nodded them a careless farewell, and, buttoning his coat, started off across the terrace.

I glanced back instinctively in the direction of
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the band-stand, only to make a second and still more unexpected discovery. The table where my other friends had been sitting was now empty. During the few minutes while my attention had been distracted all three of them had vanished from their places.

With a queer feeling that there was something in the wind, I watched Mr. Schönborn ascend the steps and disappear through a side doorway by which one can leave the Casino without re-entering the main room. For perhaps a couple of fateful seconds I sat there irresolutely : then overcome by an uncontrollable impulse, I got up from my chair and sauntered slowly after him.

By the time I emerged from the front entrance he had already crossed the square. He was evidently making for the public gardens, and, since that was also my nearest way home, I determined to keep him in sight. As a young man who had recently won three thousand pounds he seemed to me to be badly in need of a chaperon.

I was not more than about twenty yards behind him when I reached the gate, and in the clear moonlight I could see his tall figure strolling up the central path ahead of me. He was apparently under no apprehension with regard to his own safety, for his hands were in his trouser

pockets and he was humming cheerfully to himself.

I had paused for a moment to allow him to get a little farther ahead of me, and I was just on the point of stepping forward again, when with paralysing abruptness the thing happened. From behind the trunk of a big tree on the left of the path a man darted out suddenly into the open. I caught a flash of steel and heard a hoarse, startled cry: then, as I leaped forward with an oath, Mr. Schönborn toppled down on to the ground, and a black, silent figure shot away into the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

“ARE you badly hurt?”
My double blinked up at me in a kind of dazed stupor.

“What is it?” he muttered. “What’s happened?”

I slid my arm round his shoulder and hoisted him into a sitting position.

“You’ve been stabbed,” I said. “A man jumped out from behind the trees.”

“Stabbed,” he repeated vaguely. Then I saw a sudden gleam of recollection flash across his face. “Yes, yes, that’s right. I remember now. Stabbed me in the chest and I went over backwards. Must have knocked my head.”

“Let me have a look,” I suggested.

Very carefully I unbuttoned his coat and shirt, but so far as I could see there was no sign of an injury.

“Where is it?” I asked. “Where do you feel the pain?”

He fumbled about for a moment with his hand, and then, greatly to my astonishment, burst into a loud cackle of laughter.

“By Jove, that’s funny! That’s funny, if you like it!”

“What’s funny?” I demanded.

He produced from his pocket a large gold cigarette-case and held it out for my inspection. In the centre was a deep jagged dent.

“It seems to be your lucky night,” I said drily.

Mr. Schönborn suddenly ceased laughing. His eyes and his mouth had both opened simultaneously, and he sat there in the moonlight staring at me like a fool.

“Who are you?” he asked in a bewildered

voice. "Why, d—damn it all, you're exactly like me."

"Yes," I said. "I know that. Somebody pointed it out to me at the Casino." I got up, and, giving him my hand, helped him to his feet. "My name's Brandon," I added.

"Brandon?" he repeated. "Brandon? I've never met you, have I?"

"Not that I'm aware of," I said.

"Then why were you following me?"

"I am staying at the Moderne," I explained, "and this happens to be my nearest way home. I knew you'd won a lot of money to-night, so I thought I'd walk along behind and see that you weren't robbed."

"That was remarkably kind of you," he replied slowly. "But what put the idea into your head?"

"Well, as a matter of fact," I said, "while you were on the Terrace there were three men sitting at another table who seemed to be taking rather a particular interest in you. They got up and left just before you did."

"What were they like?" he inquired.

"One was a middle-aged chap with a scar down his face," I said. "He'd got a slight limp and——"

Mr. Schönborn gave a startled exclamation.

"Stefanoff," he whispered. "My God—so that's it!"

I looked at him curiously. His face had gone a shade paler.

"Of course, I can't swear that they had anything to do with this business——" I went on.

"I can," he interrupted. "I'm jolly well sure of it." He cast an apprehensive glance up and down the gardens. "If you hadn't followed me as you did," he added, "I'd have been a dead man by now."

There was a pause.

"You'd better report the matter to the authorities," I said. "I'll come along with you if you like."

He hesitated. "I'd rather you walked back with me to the villa—that's to say, if you don't mind the risk."

"Why, of course I will," I replied. "I hate leaving a job half finished."

"I think we'll go round by the road though," he continued. "There are too many damned trees about here to suit me."

He stopped for an instant to brush the dust from his trousers and coat sleeve, and then, making our way back to the gate, we emerged

again into the light and safety of the Square. With a relieved sigh, Mr. Schönborn turned to the left up the hill.

"My villa is only a few minutes from here," he said. "If you're not in a great hurry I hope you will come in and have a drink."

"It seems the right thing to do," I agreed. "After all, one doesn't meet one's double every day in the week."

He glanced at me with a rather odd expression. "By the way, I ought to introduce myself. My name is Schönborn—Karl Schönborn."

I bowed politely.

"It may seem a little strange to you that I speak English so well," he continued, "but, as it happens, I have spent a great deal of my time in your country."

"If you would prefer to talk German," I said in that language, "I think we should get along just as successfully."

He gave a violent start. "*Donnerwetter!*" he rapped out, "but you might almost be a native."

"I had three years in Heidelberg," I explained. "I'm glad to hear they weren't altogether wasted."

For a moment or two he remained silent.

"This is extraordinary," he said at last.

"Would you think me very rude if I asked you what your profession is?"

"Not in the least," I replied. "I'm a mining engineer. I have just finished some work in South America, and I'm over here for a holiday. I only arrived to-day."

"Are you alone?"

"I've got one friend who happens to be staying here," I said. "I ran across him by accident just before dinner."

"An Englishmen?"

I nodded.

"Where is he now?"

"At the present moment," I remarked, "he's probably in bed and asleep."

I don't know whether my companion thought that I intended to snub him, but when he spoke again it was in a slightly apologetic tone.

"You'll excuse my asking you so many questions," he said. "The fact is, Mr. Brandon, I'm in a devil of a mess, and it's just possible that you might be able to help me."

"What sort of a mess is it?" I inquired.

He shook his head. "Wait until we get to my place. It's no use trying to explain now."

We continued our way to the top of the hill,

and, passing the upper entrance to the gardens, crossed the road almost exactly opposite the Moderne. A few minutes' walk brought us to the corner of a quiet turning, on either side of which I could see the roofs and lighted windows of villas. At the third house we arrived at, Mr. Schönborn came to a halt.

"This is it," he announced curtly.

As he spoke he produced a key from his pocket, and, unlocking the iron gate in the wall, motioned me to step through.

I found myself in a small paved courtyard, with a creeper-covered verandah in front of me. In the centre a tiny fountain was splashing away in the moonlight, while here and there roses and other flowering shrubs had been let in amongst the stonework.

My companion closed the gate behind him, and tested it with a vigorous pull.

"I'm not sure whether my servant Fritz will be in," he said as he rejoined me. "If he is, he's going to get the shock of his life."

He stepped forward towards the house, and at the same moment the front door was opened by a slim, active-looking man in black, who stood aside to allow us to enter.

"Oh, you're back, are you?" observed his

master in German. "Did you leave that note for me at the hotel?"

"I did, sir," replied the other in the same language. "I have placed the answer on the desk in your study."

Mr. Schönborn nodded approvingly.

"Well, go and get us some brandy and soda, Fritz," he said. "I have brought a friend round with me to have a drink."

For the first time the man's eyes encountered mine, and a sudden look of astonishment flashed across his impassive face. It passed, however, almost as quickly as it had appeared, and with a slight bow he moved away noiselessly across the hall.

"Come in here," said Mr. Schönborn, opening a door on the right. "It would be cooler outside, but after what's happened to-night I'm not taking any more risks."

He switched on the electric light, and I followed him into a comfortably furnished apartment, the windows of which looked out on to the garden. Directly he entered he crossed the room and closed the shutters.

"That's better," he observed. "If those devils know I'm still alive one of them might have a shot at me from the road."

He took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead.

"I hope to God Fritz hurries up with that brandy," he added.

His wish was promptly fulfilled by the reappearance of the servant, who, advancing silently to a table in the centre, set down a tray containing the desired stimulant.

Mr. Schönborn again addressed him in German.

"You can pour out the drinks," he said. "I'll have mine neat."

He waited until his order was fulfilled, and then, as the man turned to leave the room, he stopped him with a gesture.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of the likeness?"

The other turned and contemplated me gravely.

"It is remarkable, sir," he said. "Extremely remarkable."

Mr. Schönborn nodded, and gulped down a mouthful of brandy.

"That will do for the present, Fritz," he said. "I'll ring for you when I want you."

With a respectful bow Fritz retired, and, finishing off his glass, my host again reached out for the decanter.

"I shouldn't drink any more if I were you," I said.

Mr. Schönborn stiffened himself haughtily.

"What the devil do you mean?" he demanded; then, before I could reply, his expression suddenly altered. "I say, I'm awfully sorry," he added. "I quite forgot who I was speaking to."

There was something so comically naïve about his apology that my resentment vanished at once.

"It was my fault," I said, smiling. "One should never offer advice until it's asked for."

He pushed back his chair, and for a moment we sat facing each other across the table.

"I suppose you have heard of a country called Cruto-Dolgaria?" he said abruptly.

I reflected. "I seem to know its name in a vague sort of way," I admitted. "Usen't it to be a part of the Austrian Empire?"

"Before the war, yes."

"Is that where you come from?" I asked.

He nodded. "I am Karl Frederick Augustus Schönborn, the only son of the late Grand Duke of Dolgaria."

"I congratulate you," I said. "It must be a very pleasant and comfortable job."

"That's just exactly what it isn't," he broke

out viciously. "It's a cursedly worrying job, and as for its being pleasant, well, you know what happened to me to-night." He helped himself to a cigarette from the box on the table and lighted it with shaking fingers. "It wasn't the money I've won that they were after," he added; "it was my life."

There was a brief pause.

"And who are 'they'?" I asked quietly.

"They? Why, Stefanoff and that damned son of his, Ivan." He took two or three savage puffs and then suddenly flung his cigarette into the grate. "Look here, Mr. Brandon," he went on, "I had better be quite frank. I have a certain proposition I should like to put to you, but, before I do it, there's a good deal that's got to be explained. The only point is——" He stopped.

"Yes?" I said encouragingly.

"You won't be offended, but, supposing this suggestion of mine doesn't attract you, will you give me your word of honour as a gentleman that you'll keep the whole matter entirely to yourself?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

"That's all right, then." He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and throwing himself back in his chair, stared for a moment at the ceiling.

"My father," he said slowly, "was Grand Duke of Dolgaria for fourteen years. When the war broke out he was the only man in the country who had the sense to see that Germany was going to lose."

"I should hardly call it sense," I objected. "I should say it was a clear case of second sight."

"You can call it what you like. Anyhow, that was his opinion, and, whether it was luck or judgment, he backed it for all it was worth."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"As soon as he saw that the war was coming, he cleared out."

"Cleared out?" I echoed.

Mr. Schönborn grinned. "Yes, he went to Madrid and took me with him. He also took everything else that he could lay his hands on, including most of the Crown jewels. I tell you he was no fool, my father."

"He seems to have had gleams of intelligence," I agreed. "What happened to him?"

"Why, nothing. He stopped at Madrid until the war was over, and then he brought me to England and left me in London with Fritz and a tutor. After that he just drifted about the Continent and amused himself. He died two years ago at Deauville."

"Did he ever go back to Dolgaria?" I inquired.

"Not likely," was the answer. "He was always bored to death there, and besides, directly peace was declared, Chaulieff engineered his grand coup. He persuaded the Crutanian Liberals to come in with him, and announced that the two countries had formed themselves into a Republic, with himself as President. England and France and Italy were all busy squabbling over their own affairs, so they just let him get away with it."

"Is he alive now?" I asked.

My companion nodded. "Yes," he said, "he's still President, but he won't be much longer. As a matter of fact, he's expected to die at any minute."

He stretched out again towards the decanter, and, disregarding my advice, refilled his glass.

"This is all very interesting as history," I observed, "but how does it affect you?"

"I'm coming to that," he replied, and, tossing off the neat spirit as though it were water, he set down his glass with a bang.

"It's that fool Strovno," he said bitterly. "He wants to make me King."

CHAPTER V

THE idea that anyone should want to make Mr. Schönborn a king struck me as being so comic that I very nearly burst out laughing. By a great effort, however, I managed to keep my countenance.

“Who’s Strovno?” I asked.

“He’s a general,” was the answer. “A solemn, pompous idiot who used to be aide-de-camp to my father. At the present time he’s in command of the army.”

“But why the dickens——” I began.

“Oh, you needn’t mind,” said my host, as I broke off a trifle awkwardly. “I know quite as well as you do that I should make a rotten king, and, as far as this particular job goes, why, I wouldn’t touch it with a pair of tongs.”

“What’s the matter with the Republic?” I inquired. “Isn’t it a success?”

“A success!” He laughed jeeringly. “How could it be a success when you’ve got two lots of people who simply detest each other? The only thing they ever had in common was the fact that they hated the Austrians still more.”

“Then why don’t they split up and start on their own?” I suggested.

"Because the rest of Europe wouldn't allow it. There's a heap of money invested in both countries, and it suits everyone that they should be under the same Government. They've got to have either a Republic or a Monarchy, and, taking it all round, most of them would rather have a Monarchy."

"I don't blame them," I said, "judging by what I saw in South America."

"The difficulty," he continued, "is that neither of them will agree with the other's choice. The Crutanians want Maren Stefanoff, and Strovno and the Dolgarians want me."

I drew in my breath sharply.

"Maren Stefanoff!" I repeated.

He nodded. "A girl of eighteen, and a damned pretty one, so I'm told. She's the daughter of Michael Stefanoff, who headed the revolt against the Austrians and got shot for his trouble. Of course, it's nothing to do with her really. She's being run by her uncle, that old fox you saw sitting on the terrace to-night. He means to marry her to his son."

I sat silent, while this staggering information slowly sorted itself out in my mind.

"Now you understand what these devils are after," he went on. "I haven't the slightest

doubt that that fellow who tried to stick a knife into me was some filthy Crutanian that Stefanoff had hired for the job. Unless I get away at once, I tell you I'm a dead man."

After a brief pause I managed to find my voice.

"But if you're in such danger," I said, "why on earth did you come here?"

"I wish to God I never had," he returned vehemently. "It was Strovno's suggestion: he said he was anxious to meet me, and that this would be a convenient spot. As it happened, I wanted to leave Paris—I was in rather a mess with a girl there—so like a fool I motored down and took this villa. If I'd known that the Stefanoffs were anywhere around, nothing would have induced me to set foot in the place."

"Have you seen General Strovno?" I asked.

"Not yet. He can't get away from Dolgrade for the moment, but he's sent along a fellow on his staff called Lindenfelt, who came here this afternoon while I was out. He left a letter with Fritz saying that he had a very important message for me, so I have written and asked him to come round at eleven to-morrow. If you'll wait a moment, I'll see what he says."

He crossed the room and, picking up a note

which was lying on his desk, tore open the flap of the envelope.

In the short silence that followed while he was reading its contents, I managed to get through a good deal of rapid thinking. As a stranger who had come to Monte Carlo in search of a little entertainment and adventure, I certainly seemed to have found what I was looking for in a somewhat excessive degree. Granted that Mr. Schönborn's statements were correct, I had apparently stumbled into a political intrigue which possessed all the necessary ingredients for setting Europe thoroughly alight. Furthermore, I had committed the unpardonable audacity of falling in love with Peter's mistress. Not only was Maren Stefanoff a potential queen, but, what was even more, she was already the affianced wife of that truculent and swaggering ruffian Cousin Ivan.

I was making an effort to digest this unpalatable fact when I was interrupted by a sudden oath from my companion.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed, with extraordinary venom, "that old ass Strovno's expected here to-morrow."

He crumpled the letter in his hand, and, scowling savagely, came back to his chair.

"All the better," I observed. "You've got

to see him some time, and the sooner you get it over——”

“I’m hanged if I’ll see him,” he broke in. “I know exactly what will happen if I do. He’ll jaw and lecture and bully till I’m in such a state that as likely as not I shall agree to everything he suggests.”

“Well, you might do worse,” I answered. “After all, he’s offering you a throne.”

“But I don’t want a throne! All I want is to be left alone.” He clenched his fist and banged the table with such force that one of the wine-glasses fell over and broke. “There’s only one thing for it,” he continued, “and that’s to clear out of Europe altogether. If I can get away to some place like Buenos Ayres I might have a little peace.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Everyone to his taste,” I said. “Personally, I should have thought that a job like yours was rather good fun.”

Mr. Schönborn leaned forward, his eyes fixed eagerly on mine.

“Do you mean that?”

“More or less,” I replied. “Of course, it must be rather tiresome to have people jumping out from behind trees and jabbing at you with a knife, but——”

"Listen to me," he interrupted. "If you're speaking seriously, if you really think that this sort of thing would appeal to you, I've got an idea that we might"—he paused and moistened his lips—"that we might come to an arrangement."

I nodded encouragingly. "Go on," I said. "Let's hear what it is."

He pulled his chair a little closer to the table and gripped the edge of it with both hands.

"You take my place here for a fortnight, and I'll give you the money I won this evening."

For a moment I was so surprised that I could only sit and stare at him.

"Is this a joke?" I inquired.

"A joke!" he repeated. "Good God, no! I'm in dead earnest."

"But it's impossible!" I exclaimed. "It's——"

"Why is it impossible?" he demanded. "All you have to do is to shave off your moustache and there isn't one person in a thousand who'd be able to tell us apart. You speak German perfectly——"

I cut him short with scant ceremony. "Look here," I said. "Let's get this brilliant notion of

yours quite clear. Are you seriously suggesting that I should become King of Cruto-Dolgaria ? ”

He flung out his hands in an impatient gesture.

“ Do you think I’m an idiot ? ” he asked. “ All I’m suggesting is that for the next two weeks you should stop here with Fritz and carry on in my place.”

“ And how about General Strovno and this other chap ? ” I objected. “ Do you imagine for a moment that they wouldn’t see I was an impostor ? ”

“ I am certain they wouldn’t,” he retorted, “ not if you played the game properly. Strovno hasn’t set eyes on me for over two years. You’ve only got to listen to what he says and pretend to agree with it, and he’ll go back to Dolgaria as happy as a sandboy. Before he can worry you again, you’ll be out of here and safe in England.”

“ Or else in the cemetery,” I observed.

“ Well, you may be murdered, of course,” he admitted frankly ; “ that’s why I’m offering you three thousand pounds to take it on.”

As he spoke he thrust his hand into his inside pocket and pulled out a wad of notes, which he flung down on the table.

“ There you are,” he added. “ You’ve only

got to say you'll do it, and you can have the whole damned lot."

For the first time, in spite of the apparent insanity of his proposal, I began to realise that Mr. Schönborn meant business.

"But suppose I get away with it," I said slowly, "what sort of a position will you be in at the end of a fortnight?"

"Unless anything goes wrong," he replied, "I shall be halfway across the Atlantic. I must go to Paris and London first to settle up my affairs. As soon as I've done that I shall take the first boat for South America."

I looked at him with a contempt which I scarcely troubled to conceal.

"Do you mean to say that you'd allow these people to frighten you out of Europe altogether?"

"That's the idea," he admitted shamelessly. "The fact is, I'm not meant for this sort of business. I prefer an easy life, you know—a few women, a little racing, and now and then a flutter at the tables. My father left me plenty of money, so why the hell shouldn't I do as I like?"

I stared at the heap of notes on the table, and, in spite of the warnings of common sense, I felt hugely tempted to accept his offer. Anything in

the way of an adventure has always inspired me with an irresistible attraction, and here was a chance, not only of gratifying my taste to the full, but of providing myself in addition with a little loose capital of which at the present moment I could certainly make the most excellent use. Judiciously distributed amongst one or two of the new mining concerns which I had investigated during my recent trip, three thousand pounds might in a very little while lift me into a position of comparative affluence. It was true that in the course of acquiring it I should run a very fair chance of being assassinated, but, since that was an essential feature of the suggested contract, I was not disposed to cavil at the bargain.

For a second or two I still hesitated : then, with an involuntary laugh, I jumped to my feet.

“Very well,” I said. “I don’t mind having a shot at it.”

Mr. Schönborn rose also, his face flushed and excited.

“You mean it?” he stammered. “You’ll give me your word of honour that you won’t let me down?”

“I’ll do my best,” I said modestly. “I’ve never impersonated a Grand Duke before, but——”

"Oh, you can manage it," he interrupted. "It will be easy enough if you only keep your head." He walked towards the window, and then suddenly turned and faced me. "There's something else I ought to tell you about—something you should know before you really make up your mind."

"More trouble in the offing?" I inquired.

He nodded. "It's that girl in Paris—the one I wanted to get away from. If she were to find out that I'd taken this villa, God knows what devilment she mightn't be up to." He hesitated. "You see," he added, "she's got an idea into her head that I've treated her rather badly."

"Women are very unreasonable," I said. "By the way, what's her name?"

"Olga Kreisner. She's a dancer from Dolgrade."

"Oh!" I said. "One of your loving subjects?"

"I was a fool ever to start the affair," he rapped out. "She's the sort of girl who expects to be taken seriously, and of course in my position anything like that would be quite out of the question."

"Do you think there's any real chance of her coming down here?" I inquired.

"It's not likely," was his reply. "All the same, I thought it only fair to warn you."

"Well, I suppose we shall have to risk Olga," I said. "The question that's worrying me at the moment is, what the devil are we to do about Charles?"

"Charles?" he repeated.

"My friend from London," I explained. "If I disappear in this mysterious fashion, he'll probably think I've been murdered and start raising Cain."

My companion's face clouded. "Yes," he said gloomily. "I hadn't thought of that."

"There's only one way out of it," I continued. "I shall have to tell him the truth."

"Are you sure that he can be trusted?"

"Absolutely," I said. "He's a golfer and a public schoolboy."

For a moment Mr. Schönborn brooded over my reply in silence.

"All right," he said grudgingly. "So long as you play the game I don't care a damn what you do."

I took out my watch and glanced at the time. It was close on midnight.

"What are your plans exactly?" I asked.

"I must get away from here before it's light,"

he replied. "I shall drive over to Nice in the car, and catch the early morning train for Paris."

"That doesn't leave us very much time," I observed. "I'd better start my shaving operations at once and try and get used to the part."

He crossed the room and pressed the electric bell. "We'll have Fritz in and tell him about it first," he said.

"Supposing he doesn't like the idea," I suggested. "After all——"

Mr. Schönborn laughed curtly. "Fritz is one of my people. He'd do what I told him, even if I ordered him to cut his throat."

He uttered the last words with a kind of careless contempt, and at the same instant the door opened and his obliging retainer appeared on the threshold.

"Come here, Fritz," said my host in English. "I have something I wish to talk to you about."

The man stepped forward to the table.

"I am leaving this place," continued his master; "in fact, I am leaving Europe altogether. I am going to South America." He paused. "I had a precious narrow escape to-night. I was walking home through the gardens, when a fellow jumped out from behind a tree and tried to stab me."

Fritz raised his eyebrows.

"Tried to stab you, sir?" he repeated.

Mr. Schönborn nodded. "Some filthy creature of the Stefanoffs: they are here in the town—the old devil himself and Ivan as well."

I saw an ugly look come into the man's eyes.

"Ah!" he said softly. "That is a game at which two sides can play."

"Well, they can play it without me," was the answer. "I'm catching the first train from Nice, so you can get the car ready and pack my things. I'm handing this affair over to Mr. Brandon."

There was a moment's silence.

"Pardon me, sir," observed Fritz, "but I do not quite understand."

"It's very simple," returned his master. "You can see for yourself that we're almost exactly alike, and, as it happens, Mr. Brandon speaks German as well as I do. He's going to stop here for a fortnight in my place."

Fritz received the statement with amazing impassivity.

"Am I to go with you, sir?" he inquired.

"You will drive me to Nice, of course. After that you'll return here and stay with Mr. Brandon for the next two weeks. You must obey his orders and treat him exactly as though you were

attending to me. Later on, you will come over and join me at Buenos Ayres. I shall write to you from London and give you my instructions."

The man bowed.

"That's all," added Mr. Schönborn. "Now go along and pack my things."

I had been studying Fritz closely while this dialogue was in progress, and on the whole both his appearance and his manner had left me with a distinctly favourable impression. A well-built active-looking man of about forty, he seemed to combine the unquestioning loyalty of a feudal servant with the readiness and imperturbability of a modern valet. Such qualities would explain why a shrewd judge of men like the late Grand Duke had picked him out for his present position, and it was some comfort to feel that in the insane adventure to which I had recklessly committed myself I should have at least one adherent upon whom I could apparently rely. I was congratulating myself on the fact when I was interrupted by Mr. Schönborn.

"Now we must get rid of that moustache of yours," he said. "If you'll come with me, I'll fix you up with what you want."

I followed him to the door, and, crossing the

hall, he led the way into a small white-tiled bathroom, where everything necessary for shaving was neatly arranged upon a glass-topped table.

"I think you'll be all right here," he continued. "I've got a couple of letters I simply must write before I start, so I may as well go back and get on with them. When you've finished, come along to the study."

He paused for a moment to take a final look round, and then, going off, closed the door behind him.

My first action on being left alone was to sit down on the edge of the bath and stare at myself in the long mirror opposite. Now that its opening novelty had worn off, the full seriousness of this midnight freak was suddenly beginning to come home to me. I had frequently read novels in which one man impersonated another and seemed to have no difficulty in getting away with the deception, but that such a feat could actually be achieved in real life was a proposition which up till then had never even crossed my mind.

The longer I thought it over the more fantastic and impossible the whole scheme appeared. Considering all the complications I should be called upon to face, how could I hope to avoid committing some fatal blunder which would betray

the fact that I was nothing more or less than a hired impostor? Was it conceivable, for instance, that a man like General Strovno would be as easily deceived as Mr. Schönborn had suggested? However slow-witted he might be, he was at all events playing a game in which his own fortunes were deeply involved. With so much at stake he could scarcely fail to adopt every reasonable precaution, and the slightest slip on my part would immediately arouse his suspicions.

On the other hand, even if by some miraculous luck I succeeded in sustaining my part, it would only be to find myself in the exact situation out of which my double was so anxious to escape. Judging from what I had seen of the Stefanoffs, they were not at all the sort of gentlemen who would be deterred by a single failure. There were doubtless plenty of patriotic Crutanians who, for a very modest consideration, would be cheerfully prepared to stick a knife between my ribs, and such a prospect, no matter how dispassionate a view one might take of it, could scarcely be regarded as a pleasant addition to a holiday.

Still, even allowing for those objections, three thousand pounds was an uncommonly attractive sum. My heart gave a throb at the mere thought of paying it into my bank, and with a sudden

spurt of resolution I jumped up from my seat on the bath and, walking across to the mirror, began taking off my coat and collar.

During the process of shaving, my mind was chiefly occupied with the question as to whether I should tell Mr. Schönborn about my adventure at the villa. The fact that I had already met and spoken with all three of the Stefanoffs was of course a complication of which at present he was blissfully unaware. Considering that we were, so to speak, partners in the business, there seemed to be something a little unfair in not acquainting him with the whole truth, but, all the same, after a certain amount of consideration I decided that it would be wiser to keep the matter to myself. At the most we only had about another hour in front of us, and, with so many points on which I needed further enlightenment, I was not disposed to waste time in discussing less insistent topics.

Having at length scraped off the last vestige of stubble from my upper lip, I stepped back to look at myself in the glass. Now that I was clean-shaven my resemblance to Mr. Schönborn was positively uncanny. It was indeed so convincing that it inspired me with a sudden distaste for my own appearance, and half resentfully I sponged

away the remains of the soap, and struggled back into my collar and tie.

As I came out of the bathroom I heard the sound of voices. The study door was ajar, and, crossing the hall, I discovered the faithful Fritz kneeling beside an open portmanteau, while his master sat at the table wrestling with his half-completed correspondence. When they saw me, both gave a simultaneous start.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" muttered Fritz involuntarily.

I took a pace forward and stood facing the pair of them.

"Do you think it's good enough for Strovno?" I inquired.

Mr. Schönborn stared at me for a moment without speaking.

"It's marvellous," he said slowly. "I don't believe that even Olga would be able to tell the difference!"

CHAPTER VI

SO I had not been dreaming after all !
Thoroughly awakened by my discovery, I started up in bed and sat gazing round the big dimly lit room. The clothes I had been wearing the night before lay in an untidy heap on the sofa. In the centre of the carpet stood a pair of brown shoes which I recognised as my own. Except for the faint ticking of my watch, everything was silent.

Drawing in a long breath, I dropped back again against the pillow. Fantastic as the situation might appear, there was no getting away from its reality. This was undoubtedly Mr. Schönborn's bedroom at the Villa d'Or, and unless he had missed his train at Nice, Mr. Schönborn himself was by this time speeding northwards in the comparative security of a French railway carriage.

For several minutes I lay perfectly still, trying to adjust my thoughts. One fact stood out before my mind with overwhelming distinctness. I was no longer Richard Brandon. After leaving the Casino, apparently in the best of health and spirits, that talented young mining engineer had

unaccountably vanished from the face of the earth. I was Charles Frederick Augustus, hereditary Grand Duke of Dolgaria, and a temporary but highly dangerous factor in the peace and prosperity of Europe.

With an instinctive movement I turned round and groped beneath the pillow. My fingers closed upon what I was searching for, and, dragging it out, I sat gazing at the fat wad of notes which I had stuffed away for safety before dropping off to sleep. It was one of those occasions when money not only talks, but positively shouts. Wherever else it may come from, three thousand pounds can hardly be conjured up out of dreamland, especially when it takes the form of that flimsy but jealously guarded paper issued by the Bank of France.

As I was about to restore the packet to its hiding-place, I heard a sound of steps in the passage outside. They were followed immediately by a discreet tap, and the next moment Fritz entered the room carrying a tray. He was wearing a jacket of white linen, and looked remarkably fresh and imperturbable.

"Hullo!" I said. "I thought you were at Nice!"

He came forward and deposited the coffee and rolls on a small table by my bed.

"His Highness instructed me to return directly he entered the train. I arrived back about half an hour ago."

"Then you haven't been to sleep at all!" I exclaimed.

"It is of no consequence, sir," he replied. "I can rest later in the day." He crossed the room and threw open the shutters, letting in a blaze of sunshine.

"How did you get on?" I asked. "Was anyone watching the house when you left?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. Everything seemed to be quite quiet. If there had been any of Stefanoff's people about they would certainly have tried to stop us." He picked up my shoes and returned to the foot of the bed. "I hope you managed to make yourself comfortable, sir. I am sorry I had no time to change the sheets."

I pulled the tray towards me and poured out some coffee.

"I don't know what you think about it, Fritz," I said, "but it strikes me I've taken on a devilish unhealthy job."

"You are right," he said gravely. "There

are not many who would have had the courage to accept His Highness's offer."

"It was more avarice than courage," I objected. "Do you know what he's paying me?"

"I understand that it is what he won at the Casino last night. He can well afford it."

I looked at the man curiously. "You take it all pretty coolly," I said. "It seems to me that you're in nearly as much danger as I am."

Fritz shrugged his shoulders. "It is my duty," he said simply.

I picked up my watch from beside the tray and saw that it was a few minutes past nine.

"Well, I'd better finish my coffee and get dressed," I said. "I'm expecting the honour of a visit from General Strovno at eleven, and there's one thing I must certainly do before he arrives."

"Is there any way in which I can assist you, sir?"

"Yes," I said. "I want to send a note to a friend of mine. If you can find me a pencil and a sheet of paper, I'll write it now."

"They are both here, sir." He walked over to a table in the window, and returned with a large silver-mounted blotting-pad.

"His name's Grant," I continued, "Mr. Charles Grant, and he's staying at the Hôtel de

Paris. I happened to run across him yesterday in the café. I must let him know what's happened, or he'll be going along to the Moderne and making a fuss."

My coadjutor nodded approvingly. "His Highness informed me of the circumstance. It is unfortunate, but it cannot be helped."

"I am going to ask him to come and see me," I said; "that will be best. Do you think you can get hold of a messenger?"

"I will deliver it myself, sir."

"You're a stout fellow, Fritz," I said gratefully.

For a moment or two I sat nibbling my pencil and staring at the empty sheet. Even to an intimate friend like Charles it is a little difficult to describe in a few words how you have suddenly become a Grand Duke and are in imminent danger of assassination. I felt I could make a much better job of the story if I deferred it until his arrival, so, abandoning any attempt at an explanation, I contented myself with the following effort :

"MY DEAR CHARLES,—Sorry to rout you out at such an unearthly hour, but something rather interesting has happened. Do you mind shoving on your clothes and coming along at

once with the bearer of this note to the Villa d'Or? His name is Fritz, and he is valet to our friend Mr. Schönborn. He speaks English as well as you do, but I would rather you didn't ask him any questions. Try to control your curiosity until you get here.

"Yours ever,

"DICK."

"Mr. Grant will probably be in bed," I said, "but it won't take him long to put on his things. You might wait and bring him back with you."

"Very good, sir," replied Fritz. He placed the note in his pocket and walked as far as the door. "I will clean your shoes and turn on your bath first, sir; then you will be able to get dressed. There are several of His Highness's suits in the wardrobe. Perhaps you would prefer to make your own choice?"

I nodded. "Suppose anyone comes to the house?" I suggested.

"You will not be disturbed, sir. I shall lock the gate and take the key with me."

He went out in the same quiet and unobtrusive way that he had entered, and, drinking up the remainder of my coffee, I lighted a cigarette.

Whether it was the effect of our conversation

or whether it was the soothing influence of the tobacco I can't say, but for some reason I certainly felt vastly more cheerful than when I had first opened my eyes. In the glorious sunshine that flooded in through the open window my natural optimism seemed to revive and expand. After all, considering the reckless way in which I had accepted Mr. Schönborn's offer, things were panning out a good deal better than I had any right to expect. Fritz, for instance, was a tremendous comfort. In addition to his unquestioning loyalty, he appeared to possess just that rare combination of coolness and resource which the situation demanded. No matter what the consequences might be, he was evidently quite prepared to back me up in my imposture; indeed, his manner suggested the idea that he regarded the whole undertaking with a sporting and sympathetic approval.

Then there was Charles! Could a man in a tight corner ask for a better pal? Although a trifle lazy, he had always been ready to welcome any diversion which promised to provide a little healthy excitement. I felt sure that directly he heard my story he would throw himself into the affair with a lively and whole-hearted enthusiasm. It was exactly the kind of tonic that an over-worked

golfer needed, and it would certainly do him far more good than sitting about idly on the terrace, consuming large quantities of expensive champagne.

Stimulated by these reflections, I threw back the sheets and scrambled out of bed. On opening the wardrobe, I found, as Fritz had said, that Mr. Schönborn had been thoughtful enough to leave me quite a handsome assortment of clothes from which to make my selection. It seemed to me that for an interview with General Strovno something of a slightly formal and dignified nature would be most appropriate. I therefore chose a well-cut suit of dark grey cashmere, which I could wear with my brown shoes—having slipped on the coat in front of the looking-glass, and discovered to my satisfaction that it was an excellent fit.

I was still admiring its neat appearance when the bang of the front door announced the fact that Fritz had departed. The sound reminded me that, if I wanted to be ready for Charles, I had better be getting on with my toilet, so instead of wasting further time I replaced the jacket on its hanger and made my way to the bathroom.

It was in a mood of slightly mischievous anticipation that twenty minutes later I threw open

the French windows in the hall and strolled out on to the verandah. Now that I had really embarked on my new rôle I no longer felt the smallest trace of nervousness. The whole business seemed suddenly to have become rather an exciting joke, and, with a half-impatient wish that the fun would begin, I pulled up a basket chair and settled down facing the roadway.

I had not long to wait. Barely had I taken my seat when I heard the click of a key turning in the lock, and, pushing back the gate, Fritz stepped forward into the garden. As he entered he drew a little to one side, and, with the nonchalant air that distinguishes a plus four golfer, Charles sauntered in after him. He had his hands in his pockets and was puffing away contentedly at a large briar.

On catching sight of me seated in the verandah, he came to an abrupt halt. For a second or two he remained stock still : then, as Fritz turned to close the gate, he suddenly removed his pipe and advanced in a leisurely fashion across the courtyard. With as much dignity as I could assume I rose to meet him.

“Have I the pleasure of speaking to Herr Grant ?” I inquired.

He nodded. “That’s me all right,” he replied.

I bowed. "You are welcome, sir. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Schönborn, and I have a message for you from your distinguished fellow-countryman, Mr. Richard Brandon."

There was a pause.

"Where is he?" demanded Charles.

"Where is he?" I repeated in my own voice. "Well, to tell you the honest truth, I'm damned if I really know."

CHAPTER VII

CHARLES opened his mouth, but for a moment no sound emerged from it.

I laughed.

"Didn't you recognise me?" I inquired. "Not even when I spoke?"

"Gosh!" he said slowly, "so it *is* you! I thought at first I'd gone mad." He came a step nearer. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"That's what I'm going to explain," I said. "By the way, would you like some breakfast?"

He shook his head. "I'd rather have a drink."

I beckoned to Fritz, who was approaching along the side path.

"Do you think you could find us a bottle of something?" I asked. "My friend Mr. Grant has had rather a shock."

Fritz nodded. "Certainly, sir. I will bring it out to you on the verandah."

He disappeared into the house, and, without waiting to be invited, Charles, who still looked a trifle dazed, sank down into the empty chair. I pulled up another alongside of him.

"I oughtn't to have sprung it on you like that," I said penitently. "I forgot for the moment that you'd had a nervous breakdown."

"It's like a blasted fairy story," he complained. "Why, last night you didn't even know this fellow Schönborn, and here you are squatting in his villa and ordering about his servants!" He paused for breath. "What have you done with the blighter—murdered him?"

"Nothing of the kind," I said. "He happened to have a job he didn't fancy, and he offered me three thousand pounds if I'd take it on for him. Not being a bloated millionaire like you, I naturally accepted."

Charles stared at me incredulously. "What is his job?" he demanded.

“He’s a King,” I said; “at least, he may be at any minute. Of course it’s not exactly in my line, but——”

There was a sound of steps in the hall and Fritz appeared through the open door carrying a bottle of champagne and a couple of long-stemmed glasses. He sat them down on a small iron table beside us and silently withdrew.

Charles nodded encouragingly. “Go on with your little yarn. You were just saying that you were a purple emperor or something of the sort.”

I filled up the glasses and pushed one of them across.

“It sounds a bit staggering,” I admitted, “but it’s perfectly true all the same. The only trouble is that I’ve started at the wrong end. If you’ll sit quiet and not make any silly interruptions I’ll tell you the whole story.”

Beginning with Mr. Schönborn’s appearance on the terrace, I proceeded to give him a full and faithful account of everything that had occurred the previous evening. It was a task which naturally required some time, but so vividly had each incident stamped itself on my memory that I had no difficulty in recollecting even the smallest detail. I went on steadily until I reached the end, and when I had finished I pulled out the

wad of notes from my pocket and planked them down on the table between us.

"There you are," I said, "in case you don't believe me. Three hundred thousand francs and a little bit over for luck. Now wouldn't you have done precisely the same if you'd found yourself in my position?"

Charles blinked at me for a moment without replying.

"If anything half as wonderful as that ever happened to me," he said slowly, "I think I should break a blood-vessel."

He picked up his glass, which he had left practically untasted, and with a single gulp emptied its contents.

"Does that mean that you'd like to help me?" I asked. "I don't want to drag you into it against your will."

"Against my will!" he repeated. "Why, good Lord, Dick, I wouldn't have missed a joke like this for anything in the world." He paused. "I've always thought you'd make rather an attractive king: there are touches about you that remind me of Charles the Second."

"I don't object to being a king," I explained. "What I'm worrying about is the danger of becoming a corpse."

Charles sobered down a trifle. "Yes," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose one can't altogether overlook that point. Do you imagine that those damned dagoes would really go so far as to commit a murder?"

"Well, they had quite a promising shot at it last night," I reminded him. "After all, they are playing for pretty high stakes, and Stefanoff doesn't look like a man who'd be easily put off."

Charles gave a sudden whistle. "By Jove, I'd forgotten for the moment. Why, of course, this girl you're so keen about is really your hated rival. I say, that's going to make things a bit awkward, isn't it?"

"Not the least," I said cheerfully. "I'd love to do her a good turn if I can only get the chance."

He shook his head.

"You be careful. For all you can tell she may be as bad as the others."

"I'm quite ready to trust my own judgment," I declared. "No girl with a face like that could be anything but an angel. I'll bet you she hasn't the slightest suspicion that there's a plot to murder Schönborn. She's certainly never seen him and——"

"How do you know?" he broke in.

"Why, if she had, she'd have recognised the

likeness. It knocked old Stefanoff and his son all of a heap."

"I suppose that's true," admitted Charles reluctantly. "All the same, she's going to marry into the family, and if you take my tip you'll give her a wide berth." He dragged out his pouch and began refilling his pipe. "By the way, what have you done about your room at the Moderne?"

"Nothing yet," I said. "That's one of the reasons why I sent for you."

He glanced at me inquiringly.

"I'll write them a note enclosing a week's rent," I continued. "I'll say I've been called back to England unexpectedly on business, and ask them to hand you over my luggage. If you can get hold of it, take it along to your hotel, and I'll send Fritz for it later."

"Right you are," he replied. "I'd better shove off at once, before these chaps turn up?"

I shook my head. "There's no hurry," I said. "Besides, I want you to stop here for the present. It will be a good opportunity to introduce you to General Strovno."

Charles, who was striking a match, paused in the middle of the operation.

"Do you mean that seriously?" he inquired.

"Quite seriously," I assured him. "Why shouldn't I have a friend with me, if I want one? I shall say that you were a pal of mine in England, and that you've come out to act as my aide-de-camp."

He grinned. "That's not a bad notion. Won't he think it a bit queer, though, when he finds I can't speak a word of German?"

"I don't see why he should," I retorted. "I shall explain that I wanted someone I could trust, and that I picked you out specially just because you were a good stolid, honest Englishman, who wouldn't let me down."

"If you're suggesting that I look stolid——" began Charles with a touch of resentment.

"I only meant it in a complimentary sense," I said soothingly. "'Staunch' or 'reliable' would really have been a better word." I finished my own drink and got up from the chair. "Come in and have a look over the villa," I suggested. "There's plenty of time and I haven't explored it properly myself yet."

I led the way into the hall, and, after I had shown him the study, we made a leisurely but systematic inspection of the remaining apartments. On the ground floor were a drawing-room and dining-room, neither of which I had

previously entered. The former proved to be a large, pleasantly shaped room, opening out on to the verandah, and containing a number of very clever water-colour sketches by one or two modern French artists. In one corner was a curtained recess, where several pieces of furniture, including a locked piano, had apparently been stored away for safety during their rightful owner's absence.

Upstairs we came across three more bedrooms in addition to the one in which I had slept. The smallest of these evidently belonged to Fritz, while the other two, though ready for immediate use, showed no signs of having been occupied during Mr. Schönborn's tenancy.

"I've got a sudden brain-wave, Charles," I said, as we made our way down again to the hall. "Why don't you chuck the hotel and come and stay here? You can have that room next to me, and then I can shout to you for help if anyone tries to murder me in the night."

"I'll come like a shot," said Charles instantly. "It will be a lot more amusing than stopping down there all by myself." He paused at the foot of the stairs. "We might have some trouble with Fritz, though," he added.

"Why should we?" I demanded.

"Well, he knows all about your arrangement with Schönborn, and he may think that you're not playing the game."

"We'll put it to him and see what he says," I replied. "In my opinion it's a damned sensible move."

I walked to the wall and pressed the electric bell, and in a few moments my invaluable retainer appeared from the back regions.

"We want your advice, Fritz," I said. "I've told Mr. Grant the whole story, and, like a good sportsman, he's coming in to lend us a hand. My idea is that he should take up his quarters here. If anyone asks questions about him I shall say that he's an old friend of mine and that I've invited him out here to act as my aide-de-camp."

Fritz gazed doubtfully from one to the other of us.

"It is a bold plan and a dangerous one," he said slowly. "You may be sure that General Strovno is well informed with regard to His Highness's arrangements."

"I've no doubt he is," I replied. "All the same, that's no reason why he shouldn't believe me. Considering how long I've lived in England, it's only natural——"

I was interrupted by the sudden whirr of a bell, and with a simultaneous start we all three turned in the direction of the garden.

"It is the general," announced Fritz calmly.

"That settles it," observed Charles with a laugh.

I glanced quickly at the table on the verandah. "You'd better put away those glasses first," I said. "I don't want him to think that I'm a chronic drunkard." I tossed the cigarette that I was smoking into the fireplace and nodded towards the study. "We'll receive him in there," I added. "If he asks if I'm alone, you can say that an old friend of mine, Captain Grant, has just arrived from England."

Whatever Fritz's opinion may have been, he made no attempt to argue.

"Just as you please, sir," he observed gravely, and with a slight inclination of his head he turned towards the window.

Thrusting his pipe into his pocket, Charles followed me into the study.

"This is going to be a hell of a rag," he remarked. "I wish to goodness I understood German."

"It wouldn't make any difference," I said. "I

shall have to send you away as soon as I've introduced you. One can't expect Strovno to talk business in front of a perfect stranger."

"That's all right, old man," he replied obligingly. "You're the skipper of this team, and whatever you say goes."

I surveyed the room with the calculating eye of a tactician.

"I think I'll be discovered seated at the table writing letters," I said. "I believe it's the way in which all exiled kings spend their mornings." I collected the necessary materials from the desk, and pulled forward a comfortable-looking chair.

"How about me?" inquired Charles.

"You'll be standing at my elbow," I said, "in an attitude of respectful attention."

We took up our allotted positions, and as I dipped my pen in the ink I heard a low murmur of guttural voices floating in through the open window. A moment or two passed, and then, after a discreet tap at the door, Fritz appeared on the threshold.

"General Strovno and Colonel Lindenfelt are here, your Highness."

He made the announcement in German, and with becoming dignity I rose to my feet.

"I will receive them," I said in the same language.

He bowed solemnly, and, stepping back as far as the doorway, ushered in my two visitors.

CHAPTER VIII

I MUST admit that at first sight I was a trifle disappointed in Strovno. I had pictured him as a tall, soldierly figure clad in an impressive uniform, with perhaps just a touch of the respectful and semi-paternal manner that one would expect from so devoted a loyalist. Instead of that, he looked more like a successful grocer.

He was a short stout man dressed in plain black. His fat face was clean-shaven, and, except for a tuft of hair over each ear, his head was as bald as an egg. The only striking thing about him was his eyes. They were hard blue eyes, set very wide apart, and they had a shrewd, intelligent look about them that was strangely out of keeping with the rest of his appearance.

Colonel Lindenfelt, on the other hand, fulfilled all my expectations. He was exactly like

the hero of a Balkan musical comedy, a tall, slim, brown-faced young man, with flashing white teeth and a twisted-up moustache. He had the unmistakable air of a cavalry officer, and carried himself with an attractive swagger.

Coming to a halt as soon as they had entered the room, the pair of them favoured me with a respectful obeisance. I stepped forward immediately, holding out my hand to Strovno.

"You are welcome, general," I said, "and you also, Colonel Lindenfelt. I only regret that I was not here to receive you yesterday."

Strovno bowed again, and then, as he released my hand, the younger man took hold of it impulsively and raised it to his lips. It was my first taste of the perquisites of royalty.

I saw Strovno frown and glance mistrustfully in the direction of Charles.

"You will pardon me, sir," he observed in a thick, unpleasant voice, "but before we proceed any further I should be glad to know who this gentleman is."

"You need have no fear, general," I said reassuringly. "Captain Grant is a very devoted friend of mine, and he has come out here to act as my aide-de-camp."

Tumbling to the situation, Charles made a stiff bow.

"As soon as I arrived in Monte Carlo," I continued, "I discovered that I was being watched and followed. In the circumstances I felt it advisable to have someone with me in addition to Fritz. Captain Grant does not speak German, but he is a gentleman of courage and honour, and you may rely upon him implicitly."

To my intense relief, Strovno appeared to be satisfied.

"Your Highness," he said, "has acted wisely, and I am pleased to make Captain Grant's acquaintance. We have need of brave and loyal friends, no matter what nation they belong to." He paused. "All the same," he added, "since the matters I have come to discuss are of a highly grave and confidential nature, I should prefer our interview to be a private one."

I contented myself with a nod. "Captain Grant," I said in English, "you may leave us."

Charles strode obediently from the room, and, feeling very like a steeplechase rider who has just successfully negotiated his first fence, I made an inviting gesture in the direction of the table.

"Gentlemen," I said, "please be seated."

At a sign from Strovno, Lindenfelt pulled up

two more chairs, and then both of them stood waiting rigidly until I had taken my place.

"I fear you must have had a long and tiring journey, General," I observed with an air of some concern. "I understand that you have come straight through from Dolgrade."

Strovno, who was gazing at me with a disconcerting intentness, nodded his head.

"I arrived half an hour ago," he rejoined. "There were great difficulties in the way of my leaving the capital, but it was essential that I should see your Highness personally. The time has come when there must be no misunderstandings."

I brushed away a trace of ash from my coat sleeve. "You apparently have news for me?" I said.

He leaned forward, his big, podgy hands clasped in front of him on the table.

"Chaulieff is dying. He has been unconscious now for the past three days. So far we have been able to keep the fact a secret, but at any moment the truth may be discovered." He leaned still nearer, and his hard eyes bored into mine like gimlets. "I come to know whether you are ready to play your part."

For perhaps three seconds I sat silent, while

a mischievous but not unpleasant thrill went tingling through my pulses.

"From anyone else but you, General Strovno," I said, "I should consider that question an insult."

Colonel Lindenfelt twirled his moustache and smiled approvingly.

"It is the answer I expected," he remarked.

With his underlip thrust out and his eyebrows drawn down in a puzzled stare, Strovno slowly straightened himself.

"Since our last interview in Paris," he observed, "your Highness's sentiments have undergone a most refreshing change. If I may venture to recall the fact——"

"There is no need for that," I interrupted. "I know the impression that I must have made upon you, General, and it is a proof of your loyalty and devotion to my family that I am still able to count upon your services." I paused. "The Karl Schönborn of those days has disappeared," I said boldly. "I trust his successor will be more worthy of the name."

A brief silence followed, and for a moment I began to wonder whether I had gone too far. I was reassured, however, by Strovno's next words.

"Such has always been my hope and belief," he said gravely. "I am happy to see that your Highness is also in better health."

"I was never fitter in my life," I rejoined. "It is one of the rewards of ceasing to be a fool."

There was a laugh from Colonel Lindenfelt.

"But for that fact," he observed, "we should all be in excellent condition."

"You will need good nerves for the work which lies before you," said Strovno grimly. "We in Dolgaria are prepared to do our share, but whether we succeed or not will depend largely upon your Highness. In the game we are playing there is no place for a weakling or a trifle."

I took up my pen and pulled forward a sheet of paper.

"I am waiting to hear your plans, General," I said quietly.

Strovno, who appeared a trifle taken aback, paused for a moment before replying.

"Everything is prepared as far as it can be," he began. "Of the principal members of Chaulieff's government there are only two who are not in our confidence. They do not matter. All the chief officers of the army are

with us, and Colonel Lindenfelt, who can answer for his friends, will assure you that the nobles and great landowners are royalists to a man."

The other nodded. "You have but to show yourself, sir, and the sword of every gentleman in Dolgaria will be at your service."

"As for the people," went on Strovno, "they are already tired of the Republic. Trade is bad, the taxes are extortionate, and all around them they see nothing but corruption and dishonesty. At the first push it will collapse like a house of cards."

"Even so," I said, "one can hardly be certain that they will regard a Schönborn as the best available person to pick up the pieces."

He shrugged his shoulders. "To whom else can they turn? If the country is to be ruled from Dolgrade, your Highness is the only possible choice."

"And how about Crutania?" I inquired.

"Ah!" He drew in his breath sharply and sat back in his chair. "It is there that we must expect a little difficulty."

I heard a contemptuous sniff from Lindenfelt.

"A difficulty, your Highness, which a thousand of my troopers will settle in a fortnight."

“All the same,” continued Strovno drily, “we must be prepared to face the facts. Our neighbours do not love the Republic, but they have no wish to change it for a Dolgarian prince. It is for that reason that the Stefanoffs are dangerous.”

I reflected rapidly for a moment, and then decided to take the plunge.

“You did not inform me, General,” I said, “that the Stefanoffs were in Monte Carlo.”

“Until a few days ago we were unaware of it ourselves, your Highness. For the past two months they have been at the Schloss Brunn, just across the border from Dolgrade. They left secretly by night, and it was only last week we received news that they were living here, and that Maren Stefanoff had joined them.”

“It was an arrant piece of carelessness allowing them to leave the country,” rapped out Lindenfelt. “There at least they were under observation, and when the time came we could have taken the whole gang of them.”

Strovno remained unmoved. “There was no way of preventing it. Had we arrested them on some trumped-up charge, all Crutania would have been in an uproar. The name of Michael Stefanoff is still one to conjure with.”

“Have you found out anything fresh with regard to their plans?” I asked.

“They are the same as our own,” was his answer. “Count Stefanoff also is only waiting for Chaulieff to die. The moment the news is declared he intends to seize the throne of Crutania for his niece. At the same time he will put forward a proposal that the two countries should be united under the same Government, and will appeal to the European Powers to support his claim. In France, at least, it is not impossible that he will meet with a certain amount of support.”

“And this niece Maren?” I said slowly. “Have you any idea what sort of girl she is?”

He made an expressive gesture with his hands. “A child of eighteen—a pretty little fool brought up in an English convent. Stefanoff will marry her to his son, and he himself will be the real ruler of the country.”

“It strikes me as a very serious business indeed,” I observed. “How do you propose to deal with it?”

“In an affair of this nature,” he answered, “there is only one way to act. We must strike first, and strike with all our strength. Of Dolgaria itself I have no fears. If there are any

Republicans remaining, a few troops will be sufficient to keep them in order. The rest of the army will march into Crutania and occupy the capital."

"And suppose the Stefanoffs arrive first?" I suggested.

"It will mean fighting," he admitted, "but it is not probable. Neither side can afford to raise a finger until the President is dead. When that event occurs, it will be known only to ourselves. Before the news reaches the Count our soldiers will have already crossed the frontier. From here to Crutania is a twenty-three-hour journey, and by that time his opportunity will have passed."

I stared for a moment at the paper on which I had been busy making notes.

"It is the scheme of a great statesman," I said, "and I am thankful indeed that I have such a wise counsellor and such devoted friends." I paused. "As for myself," I continued, warming to the work, "I can only say that if the time has come when you need my services, I am ready and willing to share your fortunes."

"For the present, your Highness," replied the general, "I think it is wiser that you should remain here. There is no doubt that the Count

and his friends are closely watching your movements. So long as he knows you are at the villa, he will be satisfied that there is no immediate danger. If he learned that you had returned with us, he would set out for Crutania immediately."

From the way in which he spoke it was clear that the real reason for Stefanoff's presence in Monte Carlo had never even entered his head. People differ as to what is legitimate warfare, and although on their own showing neither he nor Lindenfelt were over particular in their methods, the chance of my being assassinated was apparently one of those possibilities which so far they had failed to take into consideration. I was sorely tempted to enlighten them, if only to hear what they would say, but since the suggestion that Strovno had made fitted in so admirably with my own arrangements, I was not foolish enough to risk the experiment.

"I am prepared to do whatever you think best, General," I said obligingly. "I merely ask that if it comes to fighting I may be permitted to take my full share of the danger."

Strovno bowed. "It is well spoken, sir, but I trust that there will be no necessity. Directly the President is dead Colonel Lindenfelt will start from Dolgrade, and within forty-eight hours

your Highness should be at the frontier. Provided our plans work smoothly, the situation will then be well in hand."

"If Colonel Lindenfelt can be spared from Dolgaria at such a crisis," I said, "no messenger could be more welcome."

With a superb gesture the colonel acknowledged the compliment.

"For a Dolgarian gentleman," he replied, "your Highness's safety is above any other consideration."

I was just wondering what the devil to say next, when the clock in the corner began to strike eleven-thirty.

Strovno glanced up sharply. "I fear that within a few minutes we must be taking leave of your Highness. I regret the shortness of our interview, but it is essential that we should catch the mid-day train for Vienna. As things stand, I dare not be absent from Dolgrade for more than a single day."

I rose to my feet. "I thank you for coming, General," I said, "and I thank you still more for the news which you have brought with you. When we meet next, it will be in our own country and amongst our own people."

I held out my hand, and, rising also, Strovno bent over it respectfully.

"And on that occasion," he observed, "I shall hope to address your Highness by a different title."

CHAPTER IX

I FINISHED peeling my peach, and wiped my fingers on the paper napkin.

"Have one, Charles?" I suggested.

He shook his head regretfully. "Not now. It might bring on that infernal toothache again."

"You're lucky to have a toothache," I said. "It gives you something to think about." I glanced out across the garden where a few late roses were basking languidly in the mid-day sunshine. "If this sort of thing goes on much longer," I continued, "I shall have to take to playing patience."

"I shouldn't grumble if I were you," said Charles. "You'll get all the trouble you want within the next few days."

"Well, I wish something would happen soon," I remarked. "I don't suppose I shall ever be a

king again, and I should like to have a little fun while I'm about it."

"Those chaps only reached Dolgaria this morning," he objected. "We can't expect to hear anything for the next twenty-four hours." He paused. "Besides," he added, "when you talk about fun, I'm hanged if I altogether agree with you. What the devil do you propose to do if Chaulieff's kicked the bucket?"

"I haven't a notion," I said. "I suppose I shall have to break a leg or get influenza or something. I can't let Karl down, not if I'm going to stick to his three thousand quid."

"No, we shall have to go through with it now," admitted Charles resignedly. "It's just a question of whether the old bird can hang on for another twelve days."

"What I'm worrying about," I said, "is not being able to keep my assignation with Maren. I hate disappointing a girl, especially when she's as beautiful as that."

Charles glanced at me suspiciously. "Don't you get messing around after her. We've quite enough on our hands as it is."

"It wouldn't be any use if I did," I pointed out. "She'd naturally want to know why I'd shaved off my moustache, and I couldn't explain

the situation without breaking my word to Karl."

"That's a comfort anyhow," he grunted. "I don't care how many men I've got to deal with, but when it comes to a petticoat——"

"I don't suppose she wears one," I interrupted; "at least, not in this climate." I ate the last piece of my peach, and, picking up the stone, threw it at a morose-looking cat who was prowling inquisitively up the garden path. "Go away," I said, "or if Fritz comes back he'll probably wring your neck."

"Is Fritz out?" demanded Charles.

I nodded. "He's gone to do some shopping."

"When will he be back?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why are you so interested?"

"Well, I've got an appointment with the dentist at half-past twelve. I can't go off and leave you here by yourself."

I burst out laughing. "From the way you speak," I said, "one would think you were my nurse."

"It's all very well," he protested, "but suppose this chap Stefanoff——"

"My dear Charles," I broke in, "whatever else Stefanoff may be, he's certainly not a fool. If

he wants to get rid of me without a fuss, he won't come prancing up here with a gun in the middle of the morning." I glanced at my watch. "It's past twelve now," I added. "You shove along and have your tooth stopped, and while you're about it there's a little commission you might do for me."

"What is it?" he asked.

I produced the bundle of notes. "I want to get rid of this money. I've nowhere to put it except in my bag, and it would break my heart if anyone were to pinch it. You might pay it in at Cook's and ask them to credit it to my account at the National Provincial Bank in London. I don't like to go there myself, in case they happen to know Schönborn by sight."

"Very well," he said, hoisting himself up from his seat. "You promise me you won't get into any mischief while I'm away?"

"I shan't stir out of this verandah," I assured him, "not unless it's to go into the house to fetch a drink."

"You can wait for that till I come back," he retorted. "I shall only be about an hour, and it will give you something exciting to look forward to."

He started off half reluctantly in the direction

of the gate, and, left to myself, I pulled forward one of the big basket chairs and, cocking my feet up on the parapet, proceeded to fill a pipe.

It was perhaps unreasonable, but, as I had confessed to Charles, I was beginning to feel distinctly bored. In the first thrill of accepting Schönborn's offer, I had overlooked the fact that if I intended to keep my word I should be compelled to remain more or less of a prisoner. Although I had been successful in bluffing my way through the interview with Strovno, it by no means followed that I should be equally fortunate in other encounters for which I was less prepared. Considering the somewhat hectic life that my double had apparently been leading, there must be a number of people—such as the two ladies I had seen him talking to on the terrace—with whom, to say the least, he was on fairly intimate terms. If I ventured into the Rooms or showed myself anywhere in public, it was quite on the cards that one of these unknown acquaintances would come up and address me, an experience which, though entertaining in itself, might result in all sorts of embarrassing consequences. As far as I could see, the only safe way of carrying out my pledge was by sticking tightly to the villa grounds, and the prospect of twelve more

days of this incarceration had already commenced to fill me with an unspeakable depression.

What added to my discomfort was the knowledge that if Chaulieff died I should merely be plunging out of the frying-pan into the fire. For this, of course, I had no one to blame except myself. By a judicious display of flippancy and cowardice I could probably have disgusted Strovno to such an extent that he would have been compelled to look elsewhere for a suitable royal claimant. Unfortunately, the humour of the situation had proved altogether too strong for my sense of caution. I had been quite unable to resist the temptation of playing up to my adopted rôle, and as a natural consequence I had landed myself in a pretty awkward dilemma.

The thing was an accomplished fact, however, and all I could do now was to make the best of it. If the worst came to the worst, I should have to find some plausible excuse which would prevent my leaving the villa until my contract with Karl had been faithfully discharged. For the moment a sudden illness was the most promising remedy that suggested itself. After all, influenza is no respecter of persons. It can lay its icy hand on kings just as easily as it can on bricklayers, and no man with a supposed temperature of 102

could be expected to rise from his bed and fling himself whole-heartedly into a first-class revolution.

Provided I could keep up the deception for twelve days longer, the rest would be easy enough. The moment my allotted time was finished I should slip quietly off in the car with Charles, and we should be a hundred miles away from Monte Carlo before anyone but Fritz was aware of our departure. It would be a bit rough on Strovno and Lindenfelt, but in this ill-regulated world one can hardly expect to pick up three thousand pounds without causing a certain amount of inconvenience to other people. Charles could complete his cure by taking me for a pleasant motor tour through the sunny land of France, and under these agreeable conditions I had no doubt that my conscience would soon cease to trouble me.

I was thinking idly of the interesting places we might visit when the sudden whirr of a bell startled me from my reverie. Since there was no one in the house, the summons obviously came from the front gate, and, knocking out my pipe against the parapet, I scrambled to my feet.

"Now who the dickens is that?" I said to myself.

For a moment or two I stood staring doubtfully across the garden. It was certainly neither Fritz nor Charles, for each of them had a key of his own, and, although in my present state of mind a visitor of any sort was a welcome diversion, I felt that in view of my peculiar circumstances it would be as well to proceed with a certain amount of caution.

In the far corner of the right-hand bed, a thick bush of mimosa had grown up to a height of some eight or nine feet. Its top branches were well above the wall, forming a kind of feathery screen from behind which it would be quite easy to take an unobtrusive peep into the roadway. There could be no doubt that some such preliminary survey would be distinctly advisable, so, without wasting further time, I laid down my pipe and set off on tiptoe along the garden path.

Just as I arrived at my destination the bell rang again. It was an insistent peal this time, as though the caller were becoming a trifle impatient, and, with that subtle thrill that the act of spying always produces upon the normal mind, I placed my foot in the fork of the lowest bough and very carefully hoisted myself up.

For a second I felt as if my heart had stopped beating. There, in front of the gate, and not

five yards away from me, stood the solitary figure of Maren Stefanoff. Her face, which was in profile, looked pale and frightened, and with one small gloved hand she was tapping nervously against the stone pillar.

CHAPTER X

I LOWERED myself very quietly, and stepped down again on to the bed.

Maren !

What in the name of all that was incredible could have brought her to the Villa d'Or ? Had she come to see Schönborn, or was it conceivable that by some secret and intuitive method of her own she had managed to guess the truth concerning my imposture ? Either supposition seemed equally improbable, and yet what other explanation could there be which would account for this amazing and apparently furtive visit ?

The feeling that she was so close to me gave me a queer thrill of happiness, but, faced by the necessity of keeping my bargain with Karl, I hesitated an instant before making my decision. It was only an instant, however. Like a sudden

torrent my longing to see her and talk to her again swept away every other consideration, and, walking quickly forward, I wrenched open the gate.

With a little involuntary start that she was unable to disguise, my visitor took a half-pace backwards. Then she pulled herself together and stood perfectly still, her dark blue eyes fixed curiously on mine.

"You will forgive my asking you," she said in German, "but you are Herr Karl Schönborn, are you not?"

I clicked my heels and bowed.

"At your service," I replied in the same language.

"I—I wish to speak to you on a very urgent and private matter," she continued. "If you could spare me a few minutes——"

"But certainly," I said with a smile. "Won't you come inside?"

She stepped forward into the garden, and, letting go the gate, I allowed it to swing back into its place.

"Perhaps you would prefer to go into the house," I said. "It is cooler there, and we are less likely to be interrupted."

She made a little gesture of assent, and, conducting her up the flagged path, I crossed the

verandah and drew aside the curtain of beads which shaded the drawing-room window.

"You have called at a rather fortunate moment," I said, following her in. "As it happens, I am alone in the house."

I brought forward a chair, and, waiting until she was seated, pulled up another for myself.

"If there is any way in which I can be of service to you——" I began.

She looked up into my face with a kind of half hesitating, half desperate expression.

"You do not know me?"

I shook my head. "It is a misfortune which I am delighted to repair."

"I am Maren Stefanoff."

I was of course prepared for the answer, but, even so, I flatter myself that my sudden start of astonishment was not badly done.

"Maren Stefanoff!" I repeated incredulously.

"It seems strange to you that I should come here," she went on in a low, hurried voice, "but I have done so because I felt that it was my duty. My friends do not know of this visit: nobody must ever know except you and myself."

Still trying to appear a trifle mystified, I made her a slight bow.

"That is understood," I said.

There was a pause, while she seemed to be struggling vainly to find the right words.

"I—I have found out by accident," she began almost inaudibly, "that there are people in Monte Carlo who are determined to kill you. They think that you are planning evil against my country. It may be so: indeed, I have every reason for believing it: and yet——"

"And yet," I interrupted, "you have run the appalling risk of coming here to warn me."

She threw back her head proudly. "I am the daughter of Michael Stefanoff," she said. "My father was a hero, not an assassin."

I stared at her for a moment in silence.

"I am very grateful to you," I answered quietly. "I know that what you say is true, for the excellent reason that two nights ago somebody tried to stab me in the gardens."

It was her turn to look suddenly bewildered.

"To stab you!" she repeated.

I nodded. "If he had been a little less clumsy, your fears about Crutania would now be at an end."

I saw her fingers tighten on the arm of the chair. "But I knew nothing of this," she whispered.

"I am quite sure you didn't," I agreed. "All

the same, from a patriotic point of view it might have been considerably to your advantage."

A gleam of something very like scorn flashed into her blue eyes.

"Perhaps our ideas about patriotism are different. To me the word has only one meaning—the happiness of my country."

She looked so beautiful as she uttered this retort that I found some difficulty in sustaining my part.

"And you think it impossible," I said, "that I could be equally disinterested."

With an obvious effort she succeeded in steadying her voice. "I have no wish to be unjust. You are a Dolgarian. You may love your own country, but, even if you do, you are the hereditary enemy of mine. For two hundred years your family have hated us and persecuted us. If we in Crutania cannot be independent we will at least never consent to be governed by a Schönborn."

"I don't blame you," I said. "No one could be less proud of the name than I am, but, all the same, it's a little hard that one should be saddled with the sins of one's predecessors."

Her lips curled disdainfully.

"Is there anything in your life which gives you the right to criticise them?"

"What do you know of my life?" I demanded.

"Only what I have been told and what I have read in the papers. If even half of it is true——"

"I am not a saint," I interrupted, "but I don't want you to think me worse than I am. It's hardly likely that any friends of yours would have a good word to say for me, and as for the papers——" I shrugged my shoulders.

She studied me for a second or two without speaking.

"You don't look a bad man," she said almost reluctantly. "You remind me——" She came to a sudden halt, and, to my intense delight, a faint tinge of colour stole into her face. "But we are merely wasting time talking like this," she continued. "Every minute you stop here your life is in danger. I can't tell you more, but promise, oh, please promise me that you will leave Monte Carlo at once."

I shook my head. "I would do anything to please you except run away," I said. "It's a form of exercise I particularly dislike."

She clasped her hands. "Do you want to make me feel like a murderer? If you are killed——"

"If that should happen," I broke in, "it would probably be the best thing for both of us. I should at least have the satisfaction of knowing that I was out of your way."

She sprang up, her lips quivering and indignant.

"It is cruel of you to speak like that. I love my father's country, and I would willingly give my life to help its people, but if you imagine that I want anything for myself, you are wrong—utterly wrong." She drew in a quick breath. "There are times when the thought of what lies before me fills me with loathing and misery. If I could believe that you or anyone else would make my country happy I would be content to go out into the streets and beg from door to door."

Tears shone suddenly in her eyes, and, sinking down again into the chair, she covered her face with her hands.

I got up and, after looking at her helplessly for a moment, I moved away towards the window. I was fighting against an almost irresistible impulse to break my word to Karl. If I could only tell her the truth! If only I could kneel down beside her——

I stopped like a man struck by a bullet, and

stood staring out through the bead matting. The garden door was open, and framed in the gateway was the motionless figure of a girl. She was gazing straight towards me—her head thrown back and the sunlight streaming full upon her face. It was a beautiful face, pale and oval, with dark passionate eyes and vivid scarlet lips. Although I had never seen her before, I felt an instinctive certainty that she must be Olga Kreisner.

I heard a slight movement behind me, and, turning round quickly, I saw that Maren had risen to her feet.

“What is it?” she asked. “Why are you looking like that?”

I took a step towards her. “There is someone in the garden,” I whispered. “I must have left the gate open by accident.” I glanced round the room, and my eyes fell on the little hidden recess which concealed the piano. “You mustn’t be found here,” I continued. “Go in there behind that curtain and keep as still as you can. Directly it’s safe I will come and let you know.”

Without argument or question she moved swiftly towards the alcove, and, wondering what the hell was going to happen next, I again approached the window. By this time the intruder

was halfway up the garden. It was too late for any further concealment, so, taking the bull by the horns, I pushed aside the bead hangings and stepped out on to the verandah.

If I had not already guessed with whom I had to deal, my visitor's first words would certainly have enlightened me. She had pulled up suddenly as I appeared, and for a brief but somewhat strained moment we stood staring into each other's faces.

"So, Karl!" she said slowly. "I have found you at last!"

Like Maren, she spoke in German, and her words, though quietly uttered, had a venomous and exulting ring.

"You!" I said, in as close an imitation of Schönborn's voice as I could manage. "How on earth did you get here?"

She laughed. "Does that matter? I am not altogether a fool, Karl, except where you are concerned."

I made a deliberately crude and obvious pretence at recovering my self-control.

"Well, as it happens," I said, with a kind of uneasy laugh, "you have arrived just in time to save me wasting fifty centimes. I was on the very point of writing you a letter."

She stepped forward. "Why do you lie to me? Do you imagine that I shall believe you? Do you think that I don't know why you ran away from Paris?"

"I didn't run away," I protested. "There were reasons—important reasons—why I should leave suddenly and privately. I am not at liberty to explain them even now, but——"

"Then I will explain them for you," she broke in. "So long as there was no chance of your going back to Dolgaria, I, Olga Kreisner, was good enough to amuse you. I came to you as a new experience. You were tired of your stupid mistresses—you wanted something better—you wanted me, and you wanted me so badly that you promised to make me your wife. Do you deny what I say?"

I was in no position to deny it, but I cursed Karl heartily under my breath.

"And now," she went on with rising passion, "now that you think your time is coming, you show yourself as the mean liar I always knew you to be. You would fling me aside in the same way that you have flung aside every woman directly she has served your purpose."

It struck me rather forcibly that if Maren could

overhear us I must be cutting a somewhat shabby figure.

“Since you have such a low opinion of me,” I said, “why have you taken the trouble to follow me down here?”

She laughed again, but it was not a laugh from which one could derive much encouragement.

“Do you know me so little as to dream that you can treat me like the others?” She thrust her face so close to mine that I could feel her breath hot upon my cheek. “I have come to claim your promise. You swore that you would make me your wife, and as there’s a God in heaven you shall keep your word.”

It was a cheery sort of problem to have hurled at one unexpectedly, and for the life of me I could see no satisfactory solution.

It struck me that the best thing I could do was to temporise.

“You must be patient, Olga,” I said. “Everything will come right in time, but at present what you ask is impossible.”

Her hand went up to her breast.

“You refuse?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s no use being unreasonable. When a man——”

There was a flash of steel, and with an instinctive jerk I flung up my left arm. I was just conscious of a sharp stinging pain in my fingers, and then, as I stumbled back, something tinkled down on the stone floor of the verandah.

A little dazed, I found myself staring at a slim, murderous-looking stiletto which had rolled against my foot. Automatically I stooped and picked it up.

"When a man is in my position," I finished, "he is not entirely master of his own actions."

Breathing quickly, and with her black eyes narrowed into two dangerous slits, Olga Kreisner leaned against the parapet.

"You have escaped this time," she panted, "but if you think that you have finished with me——"

"It's no use trying to reason with you now," I interrupted. "You had better go back to Paris, and I will write to you there."

She straightened herself slowly.

"Yes," she said, "I will go ; but before I do, I have still something to say to you."

"What is it ?" I inquired.

I saw her hands clench until the knuckles stood out white under the skin.

"There is one thing I can promise, and, unlike you, I keep my promises. The time will come when you will curse the chance that that dagger missed your heart."

She faced me for a moment, flushed with anger and hatred, and then, turning on her heel, walked swiftly down the steps.

It was not until the front gate had closed behind her that I moved from where I was standing. The drawing-room window was only a few feet away, and, laying the dagger noiselessly on the table, I lifted aside the bead blind. As I did so, Maren stepped out from behind the curtain. Her face was like a white mask.

"You heard?" I said.

"Everything."

It was merely a whisper, but the contempt in her voice stung like the lash of a whip.

"Will you listen to me for one minute?" I pleaded. "I understand how you feel, but I swear to you on my honour——"

"Your honour!" she interrupted. "The honour of a Schönborn!"

"You can believe me or not," I persisted, "but as far as I am concerned there is not a word of truth in this girl's story."

She stared at me with an indescribable scorn.

“It is what I should expect you to say. Your family have always been liars and cowards, and why should you be different from the rest?”

There was an excellent reason why I should, but unfortunately I was not at liberty to state it.

“I was mad to come here,” she went on, “but I know you now for what you are. I would go through hell itself rather than see you on the throne of Crutania. If you have done nothing else, you have at least shown me my duty.”

She made a movement towards the window, but I stepped quickly in front of her.

“I am telling you the truth,” I repeated. “As God’s my judge I only want to help you and be your friend.”

Her blue eyes flashed disdainfully. “You can keep your friendship for the women you have betrayed and deserted.”

With a passionate gesture she thrust aside my outstretched arm, and, hurrying blindly past me, stumbled out on to the verandah.

I took a pace after her, and then, coming to a sudden halt, stood gazing blankly at the quivering beads. A red blotch dripped on to the white rug at my feet, and, looking down, I saw that my left hand was covered with blood. It was trickling freely from an ugly gash across the knuckles,

and, with a half stupid laugh, I fumbled for the handkerchief in my breast pocket.

As I pulled it out, a small object dropped to the ground, and lay there shining on the carpet. It was the little silver Maltese cross which Maren had given me as a souvenir.

CHAPTER XI

“IF I’m not disturbing you,” I said, “you might fasten this for me.”

I held out my hand, which I had just finished encasing in a new bandage.

Charles, who was lying half asleep on the sofa, roused himself obligingly.

“How is it now?” he inquired.

“Healing beautifully,” I said. “That’s the best of having led a clean life.”

He ripped up the loose end, and knotted the two pieces round my wrist.

“All the same,” he remarked, “I think you ought to have seen a doctor.”

“My dear Charles,” I said, “if I saw a doctor every time a beautiful woman stabbed me——”

"It might have been poisoned," he pointed out.

"But it was twenty-four hours ago," I objected. "I should have been throwing fits long before this."

He shook his head. "Not necessarily. Some poisons take a devil of a time to work. I remember reading a case——"

"Don't trouble to go on," I interrupted. "I'm not in the right mood for a funny story." I lighted a cigarette and strolled over to the window. "I wish I knew whether that young woman had taken herself off," I continued. "I'm getting used to the idea of being murdered, but I don't want to have a whole queue of people camping outside the garden gate. It will give the place a bad name."

"She'll stop here all right now she's found you," observed Charles gloomily. "You remember what Shakespeare or someone says: 'Hell——' "

"That's just what I'm saying myself," I broke in. "How can one attend to public affairs when one's hampered by a sordid domestic squabble?"

"I shouldn't mind having a look at her," said Charles. "She sounds a bit of a knock-out."

"Shall I introduce you?" I suggested. "Perhaps if you made yourself very agreeable she might take you on instead."

He shook his head. "Nothing doing. I like 'em a little less playful."

I gazed resentfully across the deserted garden.

"It was rotten luck her turning up when she did," I remarked. "I was getting along splendidly with Maren, and now the whole business is absolutely in the soup."

"And the best place for it," he retorted. "If I'd dreamed for a moment that you'd have been mad enough——"

"It's all very well for you, Charles," I said; "you're not in love." I kicked aside an obtrusive hassock and seated myself on the edge of the table. "Maren's a dear," I went on, "and I don't intend to sit by and see her sacrificed—at least, not if I can possibly prevent it."

"Well, you've got a nice little contract on your hands," was his answer. "How do you propose to begin?"

"I had begun," I said. "She'd already practically admitted that she hated the very idea of marrying Ivan, and then that damned girl butted in and spoilt everything."

"I wonder what old Stefanoff would say if he

knew about it," said Charles thoughtfully. "Judging by his appearance, I should think he could be a bit nasty at times."

"That's what's worrying me," I answered. "Maren is completely in the power of those two ruffians, and, of course, all they're doing is simply to use her for their own ends. If they guessed that she'd been here and put me on my guard——"

There was a distant tinkle somewhere in the back regions, and with a simultaneous movement we both sat up abruptly.

"Is that another visitor?" demanded Charles.

I nodded. "It's probably a tradesman. Fritz is at home, anyhow, so there's no reason why we should get excited."

As I spoke a door banged, and the next instant Fritz himself appeared in the garden. I watched him cross the courtyard and unlatch the front gate, where he stood for a moment, apparently in conversation with someone outside.

"Can you see who it is?" asked Charles.

"Looks like a hotel porter," I said. "He's just handing over some letters."

"Letters!" repeated Charles. "Oh, they'll be for me. I told the chap in the hall that if anything arrived after I'd left he was to send it up here."

We waited expectantly, while, closing the gate, Fritz started back towards the house. He came straight up to the verandah, and entered through the French window.

"The porter from the Hôtel de Paris has brought these, sir. I took the liberty of giving him ten francs."

He presented the packet to Charles with the exception of a small square envelope.

"This one is for you, sir," he added, turning to me.

"For me!" I repeated, stretching out my hand. "How the dickens——"

"The porter explained, sir. It was sent down from the Moderne this morning. They thought that as Mr. Grant had taken charge of your luggage, he would probably know your address."

"It must be from the garage," I said. "I expect they're wondering why I haven't looked in about my bicycle."

I slit open the flap, but, before I could extract the contents, Fritz spoke again.

"I think I should mention, sir, that there is a new man watching the villa. I noticed him this morning, and I observe that he is still standing at the end of the road."

"What sort of a man?" asked Charles.

"Judging by his clumsiness, sir, I should say that he is probably what they call a private inquiry agent."

"He may be in the pay of our friend Miss Kreisner," I suggested.

"It is not unlikely, sir. A young lady of very determined and dangerous character. In my opinion His Highness made an unfortunate mistake in permitting himself to become familiar with her."

"In mine too," I agreed. "Well, whoever the fellow is, I don't propose to worry about him. He can't interfere with us unless he gets into the garden."

"I will see to that, sir," said Fritz grimly.

He went off by the same way as he had entered, and, turning again to my envelope, I pulled out a folded sheet of note-paper. The writing was unfamiliar, but as I read the opening words my heart gave a sudden jump.

"DEAR MR. BRANDON,—It is very unlikely that I shall ever have the opportunity of meeting you again, and, this being so, I felt I should like to tell you that, thanks to you, Peter is none the worse for his adventure. His paw is still bandaged, but it doesn't seem to hurt him

very much, and I think that in a day or two he will be as well as ever. I am rather unhappy, as we are going away from here immediately, and for the present at all events I shall have to leave him behind. I know that he will be well looked after, but I shall miss him dreadfully. I wish I could have seen you once more, if only to thank you for your kindness in coming to my help. I shall always remember it, and I hope you will sometimes think of me as

“Yours very, very gratefully,
“MAREN STEFANOFF.”

I sat silent for several seconds : then I got up and walked to the sofa.

“Charles,” I said, “read this.”

He took the letter from me, and, discarding his own correspondence, ran his eye rapidly over its contents.

“Well, I’m blessed !” he exclaimed.

“Don’t you see what it means ?” I broke out. “Thanks to that damned girl, she has evidently agreed to do as her uncle wishes. They are going to take her to Crutania and marry her to Ivan.

There was a moment’s pause.

“By Jove, yes,” he said slowly : “that must be it, of course.”

I took a couple of paces towards the window, and then swung round facing him.

"I can't let her go like this, Charles," I said. "I've got to see her before they take her away."

He looked up at me, his good-natured face contracted into a puzzled frown.

"How the devil can we do it?"

"I don't know," I said desperately, "but if she's still at the villa there must be some way of getting at her. I don't care a curse how impossible it is: I'm——"

"Right you are," he observed cheerfully. "I shouldn't think we have a dog's chance myself, but still, if you feel like that about it, there's no more to be said." He hoisted himself up. "I'll fetch along the bus and run you over."

"Why not pick it up at the garage?" I suggested. "That will be much better than bringing it here and upsetting our detective."

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than to upset the swine," was his reply. "However, perhaps as we're in a hurry——" He stopped as though an idea had suddenly struck him. "How about Fritz? Do you think we ought to tell him?"

I shook my head. "It would take too long.

He doesn't even know that I've met Maren, and I've no time to waste in explaining it all now."

"Then we may as well start off at once," remarked Charles casually.

He led the way out into the hall, and, collecting my hat from the table, I followed him across the verandah and down the garden path.

A yard from the gate he halted.

"It's more your affair than mine, Dick," he observed, "but, if you're really going house-breaking, don't you think you ought to have a gun?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "What would be the use?" I said. "One can't shoot down a girl's relations just because one wishes to have a few minutes' private conversation with her."

"I suppose it would be a little selfish," he admitted. "All the same——"

"I've got to take my chance," I said. "I've brought the whole trouble entirely on myself, and if anything goes wrong I must put up with the consequences."

He opened the gate without further comment, and, following him through, I glanced quickly up and down the empty road.

"Hullo!" I said. "Where's our sleuth-hound?"

“Perhaps it’s his rest time,” suggested Charles. “I believe all detectives take half an hour off for tea.”

“Well, it’s not fair on their employers,” I objected. “In future I shall send him out a cup by Fritz.”

We walked forward to the next corner, where a side turning led down to the small garage at which Charles had temporarily installed his car. The only people we passed on the way were a couple of nondescript-looking individuals, neither of whom favoured us with more than a passing glance. It was not a circumstance, however, from which I derived much comfort, for, with so many distinguished parties interested in my movements, I felt little doubt that this remarkable freedom from surveillance was a trifle more apparent than real.

On reaching our destination, we were compelled to wait two or three minutes while a friendly gentleman in overalls extricated Charles’s Rolls Royce from amongst the meaner vehicles by which it was surrounded. This feat accomplished, it did not take us long to get under way, and, just as a neighbouring clock was striking half-past five, we swung out on to the Nice road.

For the first mile or so of our journey neither

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of us made any attempt at conversation. I had enough to think about trying to decide what I would say to Maren even if I succeeded in getting an interview with her, while Charles, for his part, was fully occupied in avoiding the numerous and light-hearted experts who hurtled past us behind their dust-stained goggles.

It was not indeed until we were almost within sight of the scene of my accident that he suddenly broke the silence.

"I should hate to appear inquisitive," he said, "but, apart from seeing the lady, have you any particular plan in the back of your mind?"

"I want to persuade her to stop where she is," I replied. "She's only going off to Crutania because she thinks I should make such an unspeakable King."

"And how do you propose to alter her opinion?" he inquired. "After what she overheard in the verandah you'll find the gentle Olga a bit difficult to explain away."

"It's got to be done somehow," I returned. "The mere fact that I've run the risk of coming to the villa will show her that I'm not quite such a rotter as she seems to imagine."

"Possibly," he admitted. "On the other hand, it may strike her that in addition to being

what they call a dirty dog, you're also a little weak in the head."

I laughed. "Well," I said, "I dare say that she wouldn't be very far wrong. No one who is as much in love as I am can be altogether sane."

We rounded one of those abrupt bends which make the Corniche road such a popular death-trap, and there, not a hundred yards ahead of us, I recognised the exact spot where I had parted from my bicycle.

"You can pull up," I said. "That's the Stefanoffs' house—over there amongst the trees."

I pointed to the white walls and the red roof which were just visible, and, slowing down obediently, Charles came to a halt.

"Hadn't I better come too?" he suggested. "If there's any trouble, I can hold off the relations while you're chatting with Maren."

I shook my head. "I'd rather tackle it alone, Charles," I said. "Thanks all the same."

"That's all right," was his answer. "You do exactly as you like, only don't forget I'm here. If you should happen to find yourself in a mess, just give a shout and I'll come along with a spanner."

I nodded my gratitude, and, dropping down from the car, stepped in quietly through the straggling fringe of olive-trees.

As far as I could see from a hasty inspection, the hillside was entirely deserted. Except for a few enterprising butterflies, everything seemed to be asleep in the hot afternoon sunshine, while the only sound that broke the silence was a faint murmur from the stream on my left.

I had another look, so as to make still more certain, and then, keeping well in amongst the vines, which afforded a convenient cover, I began making my way rapidly down the slope. In a few minutes I reached the spot where I had sat and talked with Maren. Right in front of me was the head of the narrow path which led to the villa, and, crossing the open ground in as unobtrusive a fashion as possible, I very cautiously commenced the descent.

I was approaching a point at which it curved sharply to the left when with staggering unexpectedness something appeared round the corner. It was a dog—a small grey rough-haired terrier with one of his front paws tied up in a dirty strip of bandage. Except for that, there was nothing remarkable about his appearance, but at the sight of him my heart gave a violent jump.

“Peter!” I ejaculated.

He came to an abrupt stop, and, cocking his head on one side, stared at me intently. Then,

with a sudden wild yelp of recognition, he hurled himself forward, and the next instant he was dancing and leaping about my legs, and making frantic efforts to lick my hand.

I dropped down on one knee and hugged him joyously.

"Yes, it's me all right," I said, with an utter disregard for grammar; "where have you——"

Before I could complete the question, my ear caught the tread of footsteps. I looked up eagerly, and, as I did so, a sturdy middle-aged peasant woman stumped into view, and stood gaping at us in obvious bewilderment.

CHAPTER XII

TO say that I was distinctly disappointed would be a very polite way of describing my emotions. Fortunately, however, the need for immediate action enabled me to pull myself together, and, releasing Peter with a final pat, I scrambled hastily to my feet. Who the devil could this be, and how was I to deal with the situation?

Recovering apparently from her first surprise, the woman came forward with a good-natured smile.

"The little dog is not usually so friendly," she said in a broad Southern accent. "Is it possible that he and monsieur are already acquainted?"

"We have only met once," I said, taking off my hat. "I happened to do him a small service, and he evidently remembers me."

As though to confirm the truth of my statement, Peter leaped up again, barking vociferously.

"Ah, *mon Dieu*! then you must be the gentleman who rescued him from the great wolf-dog. I have heard of the affair, monsieur. It was described to me by mademoiselle herself."

"So you know mademoiselle!" I said. "In that case perhaps you can tell me whether she is at home. I have come from Monte Carlo specially to see her."

The woman made a gesture with her hands. "But, alas, monsieur! Mademoiselle is no longer here."

"No longer here!" I echoed blankly. "What do you mean?"

"She is gone away with the others. They are all gone away. The villa is locked up."

A dull feeling of despair crept slowly through my heart.

"When did they leave?" I managed to jerk out.

"Very early this morning, before it was even light. A car came for them from Nice. My husband and I were awake, and we heard it drive past our cottage."

There was a moment's silence.

"Did you know they were going?" I asked stupidly.

"But yes, monsieur. Last night, just before I went to bed, mademoiselle came round to see me. She brought with her the little dog. 'Tomorrow,' she said, 'we shall no longer be here, and it is necessary that I find a home for my Peter.' Ah! she was sad, the poor angel. She offered me money to take care of him, and truly, monsieur, even without that, I would have done so gladly."

I stared down at Peter, who had seated himself beside me and was looking up wistfully from one to the other of us.

"Have you any idea where she has gone to?" I asked.

The woman shook her head. "I cannot say. do not even know whether she will return.

‘You will take care of Peter’—those were her words, monsieur—‘and one day, if I do not come back, I will send somebody to fetch him.’”

By a strenuous effort I managed to force up the ghost of a smile.

“Well, that doesn’t sound very hopeful, does it?” I observed. “Still, I’m glad to see that Peter has found a nice home. It must be a great comfort to his mistress to know that he is being well looked after.”

“Yes, we are fond of him, my husband and I,” she replied. “He is a good little dog, but he misses mademoiselle terribly.”

“I don’t wonder,” I said.

With a sudden movement she stooped down and, taking Peter entirely by surprise, gathered him up into her arms. As though resenting this unexpected assault, he yelped and wriggled violently.

“You see, monsieur! He knows that you are a friend of mademoiselle, and he thinks that if he goes with you, perhaps he will find her.”

“I’m sorry, Peter,” I said. “I’d take you quick enough if I knew where to take you to.” I moved forward and patted him consolingly. “I must be getting back,” I added, addressing his adopted owner. “I have wasted quite enough

of your time, madame, and I am extremely grateful to you for answering my questions."

"Oh, but that is nothing, monsieur," she returned. "I only wish I could have helped you more."

I left her clutching resolutely to Peter, who was still making frantic efforts to accompany me, and, retracing my way to the head of the path, struck off up the hill.

For the time being my mind seemed to have become a kind of desolate blank. All the colour and the interest had suddenly gone out of my adventure, and, without even troubling as to whether I could be seen, I climbed on up the river bank until I reached the olive-trees, where I stepped out half stupidly into the road.

Charles, who was sitting in the shade a little distance away, jumped up as I appeared.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, coming towards me, "I didn't expect you back as soon as this." He stopped, and looked questioningly into my face. "What's the matter, Dick?" he asked.

"We're too late," I said dully. "She's gone. The house is locked up and empty."

He stared at me for a moment in silence.

"How did you find out?"

"Oh, it was quite easy," I returned with some

bitterness, and in a few words I proceeded to describe my experiences.

"It's all up, Charles," I finished a trifle unsteadily. "She's probably in Crutania by this time, hidden away in some damned place where no one can find her. They'll marry her to that swine Ivan, and it's a thousand to one I'll never see her again."

He threw away the cigarette he was smoking and took me by the arm.

"It's no use our hanging around here, old man," he said sympathetically. "Let's get back to the villa."

"What can we do at the villa?" I asked.

"We can have a drink and talk it over. Things look pretty rotten, but, however badly one's bunkered, there's generally some way of getting out."

"I'm afraid it's going to take a bit of finding," was my reply, and, with this somewhat dejected prediction, I followed him into the car.

The more I thought it over, indeed, as we drove home, the more depressed I became. However this incredible adventure of mine ended, it was plain as a pikestaff that Maren was beyond my reach. So long as she had remained at Monte Carlo there had at least been some slight glimmer

of hope. Directly I had fulfilled my contract with Karl I could have gone to her and told her the truth. I could have convinced her that the plot to place her country under the rule of a Schönborn was pre-doomed to failure, and after that—well, when a man is wildly in love, God knows what fantastic dreams he is not capable of harbouring!

Upset as I was for myself, what distressed me even more was the feeling that this sacrifice which Maren was making could only turn out to be worse than useless. I was convinced by now that Stefanoff was only playing her as a trump card in a desperate gamble to obtain the throne of Crutania for his son. According to Strovno's statement as to the attitude of the European Powers, his chances of achieving this ambition were distinctly remote. The attempt would probably peter out ingloriously, while, even if it succeeded, what would be the fate of any girl married to a brute like Ivan, except a nightmare of disillusionment and misery?

"I'd give my soul to be able to do something, Charles," I said, as we stepped out at the door of the garage. "If I hadn't been such a fool yesterday, Maren would never have gone off like this."

"I don't see that you were to blame, except for letting her in," was his reply.

"Well, isn't that sufficient?" I retorted. "I've sent her away right enough, and all I can do is to sit here and imagine what's happening to her. It's damnable to be so helpless."

As I spoke the attendant came out to take charge of the car, and, moving off by myself, I sauntered along sombrely to the end of the road, where I pulled up and waited for Charles. In a few moments he rejoined me.

"You won't mind my asking," he said, "but are you really as hard hit over this girl as you seem to be?"

"Worse," I replied. "It started the first time I saw her, and since then it's been growing and growing until I feel that nothing else in the world matters the slightest."

We rounded the corner, and entered the quiet avenue which led back to the villa.

"It's a bad job," he admitted, shaking his head. "Even if she does care for you, I——" he broke off abruptly. "Why, there's Fritz!" he exclaimed. "What on earth's he doing messing about outside?"

"Looking for me, apparently," I said, for, as though in answer to his query, Fritz, who had

been standing bare-headed at the gate, came hurrying forward to meet us.

"Anything wrong?" was my opening question.

"Colonel Lindenfelt is here, sir. He arrived about a quarter of an hour ago, and is waiting for you in the study."

Charles gave a sharp whistle.

"Colonel Lindenfelt," I repeated slowly. "Do you know what he wants?"

"He wants you, sir. He is very excited and impatient. Judging by his manner, I should say that the President is dead."

"By gad!" murmured Charles. "That's done it."

There was a moment's silence.

"Well, suppose we go and ask him," I said. "We're not likely to find out unless we do."

"What are you going to say?" demanded Charles, as I stepped forward. "You can't pretend you've got 'flu now."

"It would sound a little thin, wouldn't it?" I agreed. "Perhaps I'd better tell him I've got a broken heart."

He stared at me curiously. "Considering what a hell of a hole we're in," he observed, "you seem to be taking it pretty coolly."

I laughed. "Why shouldn't I?" I inquired. "Didn't I say just now that I'd give my soul for something to do?"

"You did," he admitted. "And in about another two minutes you'll jolly well have it."

We walked on as far as the gate, which Fritz opened for us.

"I don't see why you shouldn't be present at the interview, Charles," I said. "He knows you are my aide-de-camp, and I've told him that you're the soul of honour."

Charles nodded. "I'll come, of course. I shan't understand a word you're saying, but that can't be helped."

"You'll give me confidence, anyhow," I replied. "I can always lie better when I've got a friend at my elbow."

Preceded by Fritz, we entered the house through the French windows, and, shedding our hats in the hall, followed him across to the study. My pulse was beating a shade quicker as he threw open the door, but, except for this pardonable weakness, I felt strangely at my ease. It seemed to me as though Fate had already taken the affair out of my hands.

"His Highness has returned, sir."

From within the apartment came a guttural

exclamation, followed by the scrape of a chair, and then, with Charles in attendance, I marched in over the threshold.

Colonel Lindenfelt was standing by the table, a half-finished glass of brandy at his elbow. For a smart cavalry officer he looked a trifle dishevelled.

"I am extremely sorry, Colonel," I said, as the door closed behind us. "This is the second occasion on which I have kept you waiting."

He took a pace towards me, and, dropping down suddenly on one knee, kissed the hand which I extended to him.

"Thank God you have come, sir," he said fervently. "I am proud to be the first to congratulate your Majesty."

I let him get up before I put my question.

"You mean," I said slowly, "that Chaulieff is dead?"

"He died within a few hours of our reaching Dolgrade. I left instantly, and I have travelled straight through from Vienna."

"Is the news known?" I asked.

"Only to a few who can be trusted. Strovno is in complete command of the capital, and is waiting to hear from me. Directly he receives my telegram he will proclaim your Majesty."

There was a moment's pause.

"Have you any doubt as to my answer?" I asked.

"For myself, sir, none at all. Your duty, your honour, your happiness—everything that makes life worth living call you to Dolgaria."

I drew in a deep breath. "By God, you're right," I said quietly.

Lindenfelt's sunburnt face flashed into a triumphant smile.

"Spoken like a king," he said magnificently. "With your permission, sir, I will send a message to General Strovno at once. In the meantime, if there are any preparations that your Majesty wishes to make——"

"Well, I must change my clothes," I interrupted. "I can't go racing about Europe in white ducks."

He glanced at his watch. "We have exactly three-quarters of an hour, sir. I have reserved a compartment in the six-thirty train for Vienna, and a car will be waiting at Strelsburg to take us across the frontier. I assume that you will bring this gentleman and your servant with you?"

For the first time I looked at Charles, who throughout our interview had been standing impassively in the background.

"How would you like to come with me to Dolgaria, Charles?" I asked him in English.

He smiled affably. "I don't mind," he said, "not if we have a smoker."

I turned again to the colonel. "We are quite ready," I said; "at least, we shall be by the time you get back."

He bowed. "I shall not be long, sir. It is only one word that I have to send to the general, but it is a word which will make history."

I stepped to the wall, and pressed the bell.

"You had better finish your drink before you go," I suggested. "We none of us know how many more we shall get."

He picked up the glass and raised it in the air.

"I drink your Majesty's health. To the first King of Cruto-Dolgaria!"

As he drained the toast, the door opened and Fritz appeared on the threshold.

"Show Colonel Lindenfelt to the gate, Fritz," I said, "and then come back here."

With another deep obeisance our visitor departed, and, relapsing from his military attitude, Charles sank wearily into the nearest chair.

"What the hell have you been up to now?" he demanded.

"Chaulieff's dead, Charles," I said. "The

revolution has begun, and I've promised to start for Dolgaria in half an hour."

He stared at me for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

"Is that all?" he said. "I had an idea it was something serious."

"I couldn't help it," I continued. "It's my only possible chance of finding Maren."

He rose from his chair, and, crossing to the table, picked up the bottle of brandy.

"Well, we'll just have one," he observed, "and then I suppose we'd better go and pack."

I took him by the arm. "That was only Lindenfelt's suggestion," I explained. "You don't suppose I'm really going to let you in for this?"

He poured out a three-finger peg, and tossed it off suddenly.

"You needn't be selfish," he said, "even if you are in love."

From the end of the garden came the distant slam of a gate.

"If you ever want a certificate as a pal, Charles——" I began.

"I'm not thinking of you," he interrupted: "I'm thinking of my golf. This is exactly the sort of thing that might put me back on my game."

CHAPTER XIII

WE wound our way up between two great gloomy bastions of rock, and, mounting a last steep slope, came out on to the crest of the hill. Cool and invigorating, the keen mountain air blew in our faces.

Lindenfelt, who was driving, brought the car to a standstill and switched off his engine.

"The Ibar," he said, pointing down to a broad, sullen-looking stream which ran through the valley. "As soon as we have crossed that, sir, you will be in your own country."

Removing the horn-rimmed glasses that shielded my eyes, I stood up and surveyed the panorama beneath me. For an abrupt half mile the road descended in sharp curves until it reached a rough stone bridge. On the farther side it commenced to climb upward again in the same tortuous fashion, and disappeared finally amongst the forest of black pine-trees that crowned the opposite slope.

"How long will it take us to get to this place of yours?" I inquired.

"About an hour and a half," was his answer. "It's not more than twenty-eight miles, but the

road is bad, and we can't afford to risk a breakdown."

I turned round to Charles, who was sitting alongside Fritz in the back seat.

"We're just entering the last lap," I explained in English. "That's 'Dolgaria—that sunny-looking spot over there."

Charles inspected my new kingdom without any visible enthusiasm.

"I wonder if there's a pub anywhere about," he remarked a little plaintively. "I could do with a large vodka or whatever filth they happen to drink."

"You'll have to wait till we get in," I replied. "That's one of the chief disadvantages of travelling with Royalty."

I resumed my seat, and, releasing his brakes, Lindenfelt started off again down the hill.

"I fear you will find the accommodation rather poor, sir," he observed. "I can promise your Majesty a bed and something to eat, but apart from that——" He broke off with a slight shrug.

"Apart from that," I said, "I have no particular cravings."

"It is really little more than a hunting-lodge," he continued. "The castle, which belonged to

my ancestors, was burned down in the last war with Crutania, and my father rebuilt the present place out of the ruins. There is an old forester who looks after it for me, and I go there occasionally in the winter to shoot boars."

"It sounds nice and private, anyhow," I said encouragingly.

"That was General Strovno's reason for selecting it, sir. He is coming out from Dolgrade by car, and will meet us there this evening. Until we know the result of the proclamation, it is safer that your Majesty's arrival in the country should remain a secret."

"Do you think yourself that there'll be much trouble?" I asked.

"It is just possible that some of the scum in the towns may raise a yelp for the Republic," he replied contemptuously. "A few machine-guns will soon stop their mouths."

"And what about Crutania?" I inquired.

"It was quiet enough when I left Dolgrade," he answered. "If the Stefanoffs have made any move since, I have no doubt that the general is fully aware of it. All over the country we have agents who can be trusted implicitly."

He swung round a blind corner, narrowly missing a large tree which had fallen half-way

across the road, and, coming to the conclusion that it would be wiser not to distract his attention, I again relapsed into silence.

For the hundredth time since stepping into the train at Monte Carlo I found myself wrestling with the same insoluble problem. What was going to be the end of this crazy adventure? That there must be an end, and in all probability a speedy and somewhat unpleasant one, was too obvious a fact to be questioned. It made little difference to me how Strovno's arrangements were progressing, for, whether his plan failed or succeeded, my position would be equally impossible. The very most I could hope for was that by the time the crash came I might have picked up a certain amount of information which would enable me to get in touch with Maren. For that I was prepared to risk anything, and, although neither Charles nor Fritz had the same inducement, I knew that, no matter how desperate things became, I could count upon them both to stick by me to the last moment.

It was by his own choice that Fritz was with us.

On his return from escorting Lindenfelt to the gate I had taken him frankly and unreservedly into my confidence. I had explained my reason

for accepting Strovno's invitation, and had pointed out that if he preferred to remain at the villa rather than run his head into a hornets' nest, he was perfectly at liberty to please himself. He had listened to me with his usual imperturbability, and had replied without hesitation that, in view of his master's instructions, he considered it his duty to accompany us.

Whether his decision was really inspired by loyalty to Karl I can't say, but it had certainly had a cheering effect on my own spirits. The few days during which we had been together had already given me a profound respect for his abilities, while the fact that he himself was a native of Dolgaria, and well acquainted with the country, was of course an additional asset of almost incalculable value.

So far I had found no opportunity of talking to him, for throughout the long journey from Monte Carlo to Vienna I had been closeted in a reserved compartment with Lindenfelt. From the Austrian capital we had proceeded by train to Strelsburg, where a car had been waiting for us outside the station. A fifty-mile run over some of the worst roads in Europe had brought us to the frontier, and now, as the shadows were beginning to lengthen, we found ourselves, like

Moses on Pisgah, with the promised land spread out before us.

On the near side of the bridge an Austrian sentry in uniform was pacing slowly up and down the grass. As we approached, he moved out into the roadway, and, bringing the car to a halt, our driver produced from his pocket a small official-looking slip of paper. Whatever the document was, it certainly proved effective, for, after examining it and handing it back, the man stepped aside with a salute and permitted us to pass.

"I don't know whether we have to thank you, Colonel Lindenfelt," I said, "but this is the most efficiently conducted tour I have ever been on in my life."

"Every detail of the journey was worked out before I left Dolgrade, sir," he replied. "It would have been madness to take any chances. We chose this route because, owing to the state of the road, it is practically never used except by a few local peasants. Had we come through Holstadt, which is the nearer way, it is just possible that your Majesty might have been recognised."

I stared ahead at the gloomy-looking forest towards which we were rapidly advancing.

"There's not much chance of that now," I observed. "It will be too dark to see anybody by the time we get amongst those trees."

He nodded. "So much the better," was his reply. "I have every faith in General Strovno's arrangements, but I must confess I shall be considerably more comfortable when your Majesty is safe at the lodge."

I rubbed my elbow, which, thanks to a large pot-hole, had just come in painful collision with the handle of the door.

"So shall I," I agreed with some feeling.

We bumped on slowly up the winding and deserted hillside, until, in the gathering dusk, the gaunt pine-trees began to close in on either side. After a little while Lindenfelt switched on his lamps, and their yellow glare streamed out between the bare trunks, and lit up the uneven surface of the road. It revealed nothing, however, in the guise of a human being. Very occasionally the black outline of a woodcutter's hut loomed momentarily into view, and every now and then we heard the quick rustle of some small animal as it scuttled away into the darkness.

I had slept badly in the train, and now, in spite of the almost continuous jolting of the car, a

growing drowsiness gradually took possession of me. There being obviously every reason why I ought to keep awake, I fought against it as well as I could. Notwithstanding my efforts, however, I kept on finding my eyes automatically closing, and at last I dropped off into a kind of half-conscious doze, which must have lasted through the whole of the latter half of the journey.

I awoke anyhow with a sudden start to discover that we were once more in the open. About a hundred yards ahead of us I could see the lighted windows of what looked like a small farmhouse, which stood back from the roadway behind a low stone wall. Framed in the gateway was the figure of a man with a lantern.

"Here we are at last, sir," said Lindenfelt cheerfully. "That's old Jacob Schwartz, the forester, and if he has carried out my orders there ought to be a meal ready for us."

He brought the car up to the gate, where his worthy retainer, a huge elderly man with an enormous white beard, stood bowing and blinking in the glare of the headlights.

"All well?" Lindenfelt inquired curtly.

"All is well, Excellence."

"Has the general arrived?"

“Not yet. I have been expecting him for the last half-hour.”

Lindenfelt glanced at the clock on the dashboard. “He should be here any minute now. How about food, Jacob? We are all famished, so I hope you have found us something to eat.”

“There is meat, cheese, and wine,” was the answer. “It is rough fare, but what can one do at such a short notice?”

He walked beside the car to the front door, which was standing open, where somewhat stiffly we unpacked ourselves and clambered out.

“I will show His Majesty and this gentleman to their rooms,” said Lindenfelt. “You take in the bags and then bring up supper as soon as you can. If you want any help, Fritz here will lend you a hand.”

He shepherded us into a large, dimly lit hall, the walls of which were hung round with boars’ heads and stags’ antlers. There was an open stone hearth at one end, that looked capable of roasting the proverbial ox. In the centre stood a table already laid for a meal, and at the back a rough staircase led up to the storey above.

“This was once the old banquet hall of the castle, sir,” said Lindenfelt, with a touch of

family pride. "It is not the first time that it has had the honour of entertaining a Schönborn."

"I hope it won't be the last," I replied. "Some day, when we are a little less busy, I should love to come here and shoot a boar."

He laughed. "I shall remind you of that promise, sir. Meanwhile, before supper is served, I expect both your Majesty and Captain Grant would be glad of a wash and a change. If you will allow me, I will take you to your rooms."

We mounted the staircase to the landing above, where he conducted me into a fair-sized, plainly furnished apartment, lit by an evil-smelling lamp. The floor was covered with rugs, made out of rather moth-eaten looking skins, and there was a communicating door to the adjoining room.

"Captain Grant will be sleeping in there, sir," he said, "and if you should want me I shall be at the farther end of the passage. I will send along your Majesty's bag and also some hot water."

He went off, taking Charles with him, and, after depositing my overcoat on the rail of the bed, I strolled across and looked out of the open window.

Dark as it was, I was able to get a fair idea of my immediate surroundings. Down below lay a

kitchen garden, in which I presumed the faithful Jacob was accustomed to employ his leisure hours. It was a crescent-shaped patch of about an acre in extent, and was bounded by a high wooden paling. On the farther side ran an open stretch of grass, some two or three hundred yards in width, and beyond that an unbroken wall of black forest rose sombrely against the night sky.

I had just arrived at the conclusion that it was rather a depressing spot for a week-end pleasure resort when I was interrupted by a knock. In answer to my summons, Fritz entered carrying the hot water and my luggage.

"Well, Fritz," I said, as soon as he had closed the door. "It seems to be going all right so far."

"We have got here, certainly, sir," he admitted.

I left the window and seated myself on the edge of the bed.

"I hope you're not sorry you've come?" I said.

"I considered it my duty, sir," was his answer. "His Highness's orders were that if you were in any difficulty I was to give you all the help I could."

"I suppose one might call this a difficulty," I

agreed. "Heaven knows how we shall end up, but if there's the slightest chance of finding out what's happened to Mademoiselle Stefanoff I mean to stick it out to the last."

"Quite so, sir," returned Fritz dispassionately. "I suppose you have got no further information with regard to the young lady?"

"Not as yet," I said. "General Strovno will be here to-night, though, and it's quite likely that we shall learn something from him. If she has already arrived in Crutania, he is almost certain to have heard about it."

Fritz paused. "It will be awkward, sir, if the general wishes you to proceed to Dolgrade."

"Very awkward," I agreed. "However, it's no use worrying about things before they actually happen. Should the worst come to the worst, we shall have to make a bolt for it. Do you think you could find your way from here to the frontier?"

He nodded. "I was brought up within six miles of this very spot, sir. My father was the late Duke's head woodcutter. There is hardly a path in the forest that I haven't been through as a boy."

"That's comforting, anyhow," I remarked. "By the way, Fritz, where are you sleeping?"

"I have a small bedroom downstairs," he answered, "next to the old man Jacob Schwartz."

"Well, make yourself pleasant to him," I said. "Have a nice friendly chat while we're at supper and see if he can give us any useful tips. I'll get all the news I can out of the general, and after he's gone we'll meet here and compare notes."

"Very good, sir," said Fritz, and, as tranquilly as though the present situation were entirely normal, he poured out my hot water and left me to my ablutions.

I had completed these, and was just struggling into a clean collar, when I heard Charles's voice from the adjoining bedroom.

"Are you there, Dick?" he asked.

I invited him to enter, and, opening the door quietly, he strolled in smoking a cigarette.

"This is a lively sort of shack you've brought us to," he remarked. "What's it supposed to be—one of the royal pig-farms?"

"It's Lindenfelt's country house," I explained. "We are stopping here in order to have a conference with Strovno. He is coming over from Dolgrade to tell us how the revolution is getting on."

"I hope he won't be long," said Charles. "If

I don't get something to eat soon I shall burst into tears."

"Oh, we're not going to wait," I returned. "There's some supper ready for us as soon as we choose to go down."

He brightened considerably. "How do things look?" he inquired. "I've been cooped up in the back of that damned car listening to you jawing to Lindenfelt, but of course I haven't been able to make out a single word."

"You've not missed a great deal," I assured him. "At the present moment Lindenfelt is as much in the dark as we are. We shan't get any news until the general turns up, so all we can do is to sit tight and look pleasant. I've already arranged with Fritz that directly I find out how the land lies, we'll all three meet here in this room and have a heart-to-heart talk."

"That will suit me," said Charles amiably. "What I'm really interested in just now is the question of food."

"Well, I'm ready," I said. "Come along down and let's get on with it."

As we reached the foot of the stairs, Lindenfelt appeared through a door on the left. He was carrying a squat flagon, thickly covered with dust.

"I have made one happy discovery, sir," he said. "We can at least drink your Majesty's health in a wine worthy of the occasion. This is the last of some Imperial Tokay which was given to my father by the late Emperor of Austria."

"It will be a most acceptable compliment," I said, "as long as you leave me a little in the bottom of the bottle."

He laughed. "We will restrain our loyalty to that extent, sir." He deposited his burden reverently on a side-table against the wall, and then, wiping the tips of his fingers on a silk handkerchief, crossed over towards the fireplace. "I should like to call your Majesty's attention to one very convenient feature about this house," he continued. "Should we wish to leave here without being seen, there is always a way open."

As he spoke, he pressed lightly upon a stone knob at one end of the mantelpiece, and at the same instant the great granite slab, which formed one side of the hearth, began to turn inwards. Without a sound it moved slowly back until it had disappeared from view, and I found myself staring into a narrow opening, from which the top rungs of an iron ladder led down into the darkness below.

CHAPTER XIV

IT was Charles who was the first to break the silence.

"Like a conjuring trick, isn't it?" he remarked. "I wonder if that's where he keeps the beer."

Lindenfelt waved a hand towards the aperture.

"You see," he observed. "It is an underground passage which was made as a means of escape when the castle was built. As you may guess, the secret has been very carefully kept. With the exception of ourselves, Jacob Schwartz is the only living person who knows of its existence."

I stepped forward and peered down the shaft.

"Where does it go to?" I asked.

"It runs across to the forest," he answered.

"At the farther end there is another ladder, and when you have climbed that, you come out through a trap-door into a cave in the rocks. From there, there is a path through the trees which leads to the river, where, in case one should ever happen to need it, I take the precaution of keeping a small motor-launch. In times such as these it is as well to be on the safe side."

He pressed the knob again, and, as the great

stone swung slowly back into its place, the welcome figure of Jacob, carrying a heavily laden tray, emerged from the opposite doorway.

"I had hoped that the general would be in time to join us," said Lindenfelt. "He cannot be much longer now, but all the same——" He glanced suggestively in the direction of the table.

"I am entirely of your opinion," I agreed. "Especially as there is only one bottle of that wine."

I took my place at the head of the board, and, having waited respectfully until I was seated, the other two followed my example.

Although the meal was certainly a simple one, it proved to be far from justifying the description of "rough fare" which Jacob had applied to it. As the principal dish there was a Westphalian ham, the flavour and tenderness of which would have been sufficient to demoralise an entire synagogue. It was supported by a crusty, newly baked brown loaf of noble proportions, together with an immense slab of fresh butter in an earthenware bowl. The cheese—a supper in itself to anyone as hungry as ourselves—was not unlike an English Stilton, while as for the Tokay, well, if it were really a present from the late lamented

Francis Joseph, that unfortunate monarch must undoubtedly have been in his dotage.

We had just about reached the end of our repast, and Lindenfelt was discoursing eloquently on the enthusiasm which my appearance in the country would produce amongst his aristocratic friends, when from somewhere outside in the forest came the faint bleat of a motor-horn.

Almost before it had died away our host had jumped to his feet.

"The general at last!" he exclaimed. "Now we shall know what has been happening in Dolgrade."

He shouted for Jacob, and the old man, who had evidently heard the sound himself, came hurrying into the hall, carrying his lighted lantern.

As he advanced to open the door, Lindenfelt turned to me.

"An historic moment, sir," he observed. "I thank heaven that I have been spared to witness it."

I raised my glass. "I don't want to be selfish," I said, "but I hope for my own sake that heaven is in no hurry for your society."

With a gratified flush the colonel bowed himself almost double, and at the same time my ears

caught the hum of a rapidly approaching car. Louder and louder it grew, and in another minute the darkness outside was illuminated by a brilliant glare, and amidst a grinding and squeaking of brakes a huge limousine halted at the gateway.

As the bulky figure of Strovno emerged from its interior and came stumping up the path into the light it struck me at once that he was looking tired. There were dark rings under his eyes, as if he had been up all night, and, although he had exchanged his black clothes for a field grey uniform, he had none of that dominating and triumphant air which one would associate with a successful king-maker.

On seeing me, however, his expression cleared.

"So!" he ejaculated in his queer, guttural voice, "your Majesty is here and safe. That at least is something to be grateful for."

He bowed as he spoke, and, taking a pace forward, I held out my hand.

"Where else should I be," I said, "except with those who are risking their lives for me?"

Lindenfelt, who was obviously bursting with impatience, made a signal to Jacob.

"Lay a fresh place at once," he said sharply, "and bring up a bottle of the best wine we have." He turned to Strovno. "You will excuse our

not waiting for you, general. We came straight through from Strelsburg without a stop, and His Majesty was tired and hungry."

Strovno released my hand, and, removing the peaked cap from his bald head, tossed it abruptly on to the sofa.

"You needn't order anything for me," he said. "I dined before I started, and in any case we have no time now for eating and drinking. During the next few hours the fate of this country will be settled beyond dispute."

There was a grim note in his voice which had a suddenly sobering effect upon all of us, and, stepping back to the head of the table, I resumed my chair.

"Please be seated, gentlemen," I said. "Whatever news the general has to give us, the sooner we hear it the better."

A pause followed while the three of them took their places, and then, without indulging in any further preliminaries, Strovno began to speak.

"At mid-day yesterday," he said, "a proclamation was posted simultaneously all over the country, announcing that your Majesty had succeeded to the throne. In Dolgrade and the other principal towns it was read publicly by the officer in command of the garrison. At the same

time, in accordance with my orders, all the chief Government buildings were occupied by soldiers. The country was placed under martial law, and an official message was sent to the different embassies informing them of the King's accession. In every way that it was possible to foresee, our plans worked admirably."

Lindenfelt brought his fist down upon the table with a triumphant bang. "Magnificent!" he exclaimed. "I was convinced of it from the very first."

"Unfortunately," continued Strovno in the same dispassionate tone, "we appear to have made one miscalculation. Judging by the events of the last twenty-four hours, the Republican party is a great deal stronger than we imagined. Instead of having to deal with a mere rabble, we are faced by a determined and organised opposition."

The colonel stared at him incredulously.

"An opposition!" he repeated. "Who the devil——?"

"You remember Bernstorff—the little hunchback who used to be Minister for Transport?"

"That miserable dog!"

"Even dogs can be troublesome," was the answer. "At the present moment Bernstorff is

very troublesome indeed. He has barricaded himself in the lower quarter of the town with two or three thousand working men at his back, and has openly proclaimed the continuation of the Republic."

Lindenfelt's face flushed hotly. "But this is intolerable!" he cried. "How is it that they have not been attacked and destroyed?"

"For the excellent reason that our arrangements are not yet complete. There has been much to do, and when we strike it is essential that the blow shall be a final and crushing one. We have planned to assault the quarter early to-morrow. The force at our command will be overwhelming and"—he turned to me—"I can assure your Majesty that, before the day is ended, Bernstorf will be either dead or safely in prison."

I expressed my approval with a nod.

"What has been happening in Crutania?" I asked. "Have the Stefanoffs made any move yet?"

"They have made a very definite move," he said drily. "I don't know how the news of Chaulieff's death reached them, but yesterday evening they managed to avoid our patrols and crossed the border near Zurnbad. We have reports already that bodies of armed peasants

are marching on the capital, and that there is an open agitation in favour of Michael's daughter."

"There is only one thing to do," declared Lindenfelt. "The whole brood must be wiped out before they can make any further mischief. Have you any idea where they are hiding themselves?"

"The Count and his son are with the peasants in the north. I have reason to believe that they have sent the girl to the Schloss Brunn."

"The Schloss Brunn!" repeated Lindenfelt excitedly. "But it is just across the frontier—not more than twenty miles from here! If you will give me a troop of horse——"

"The girl can wait!" interrupted Strovno curtly. "She will do no harm where she is, and for the present at least we have more important matters to deal with."

He leaned forward and addressed himself to me. "I will explain our position as shortly as I can, sir. What we have to consider before anything else is the attitude of France and England. Unless we obtain the assent of those two Powers, your Majesty's restoration is practically impossible. In both cases their approval will depend largely upon the amount of success which we have been able to achieve. So long as Dolgaria

and Crutania remain under one strong central Government, the question as to whether it is a Monarchy or a Republic is a matter of secondary importance. If our European creditors are assured that they will receive their interest, they will be prepared to support any party that appears to have the majority of the nation behind it. This being the case"—he placed his elbow on the table and wagged his fat forefinger at me impressively—"we can afford to make no mistake with regard to our own malcontents. It is necessary that Bernstorf and his supporters shall be completely exterminated. Your Majesty's entry into the capital must have all the aspects of a popular and triumphant success."

There was a blend of cynicism and ruthlessness about the worthy general which some people might have found repulsive, but now that I had at last got definite news of Maren I was too contented to be critical.

"You are right, of course," I said, "but how do you propose to deal with Crutania? Won't any delay there be equally fatal?"

He shook his head. "On the contrary, it will give us the very excuse we are looking for. Stefanoff may have a large following among the peasants, but he will meet exactly the same

opposition in the towns as we have had to face here. There will be fighting and disturbances everywhere: in fact, the whole country will be in a state of anarchy. Having settled with Bernstorff and established your Majesty on the throne, I shall then march into Crutania and occupy the capital. Before anyone has time to interfere, Europe will be presented with a *fait accompli*, which for the sake of her own financial interests she will probably be ready enough to accept. All nations are friendly when they hope to gain by the transaction."

"I don't wish to flatter you, General," I said, "but Cruto-Dolgaria has unquestionably found her Bismarck." I paused. "What do you propose to do with me while you're cleaning up the city?" I added.

"I have considered the matter carefully," was his reply, "and in my opinion your Majesty will be safest where you are. No one is aware of your arrival in the country, and so long as you remain quietly here no one is likely to discover it. I fear that I shall need the services of Colonel Lindenfelt, but before we leave I have no doubt that he will make all possible arrangements for your comfort. At the worst it will not be for more than forty-eight hours."

"But, Almighty God!" exclaimed Lindenfelt. "You do not suggest leaving the King here without a suitable guard?"

"That," said Strovno calmly, "is precisely what I am suggesting. There are spies everywhere, and the presence of soldiers in this out-of-the-way place would immediately arouse suspicion. Of course, if His Majesty is at all apprehensive——"

"Not in the least," I broke in hastily. "It seems to me a most sensible proposal, and I am sure that on second thoughts Colonel Lindenfelt will agree with us."

The colonel sat frowning and pulling at his moustache.

"But the risk, sir!" he protested. "Supposing we were betrayed and the house were attacked——"

I laughed. "There is always your underground passage," I said. Then, seeing that he was about to speak again, I turned to Strovno and added quickly: "I don't want to take up more of your time than you can spare, General. With things as they are, I expect that you are anxious to get back to Dolgrade."

He bowed. "Every minute is of importance,

sir. With your permission I will start as soon as Colonel Lindenfelt is ready."

Apparently convinced that further opposition would be useless, our host rose from his chair.

"I shall not keep you long," he said. "There are a few instructions which I wish to give to Jacob."

He strode from the hall, and, as the door closed behind him, Strovno leaned forward confidentially across the table.

"I would leave him here if I could, sir, but it is absolutely essential that he should be with us to-morrow. There is no officer in your army who has such an influence with the troops."

"You needn't apologise," I returned. "In a crisis like this a good soldier must naturally be invaluable, and it would be madness to waste his services in order that he may stop here and entertain me."

Strovno gave a satisfied grunt. "You have inherited your father's brains, sir. If all princes were equally intelligent there would be fewer vacant thrones in Europe." He glanced at Charles, who throughout our conversation had maintained an attitude of dignified but respectful attention. "We appear to be placing a great deal of responsibility upon your friend Captain

Grant," he continued, "but perhaps your Majesty will explain to him that there is no real danger. It is a regret to me that I am unable to speak English."

"The general has a commission for you, Charles," I said. "He is going back to Dolgrade to mop up some rebels, and he wants you to take great care of me while he's away."

Charles bowed gravely. "Tell him," he said, "that I will look after you like a mother."

I was about to translate this into appropriate German, when I was interrupted by a sudden exclamation from Strovno.

"Ah, yes!" he observed, "there is one other thing which I had quite forgotten." He flung a quick look round the room, as though to make sure that no one was within earshot. "Does your Majesty know that at the time of his death Chaulieff still had some of the Crown jewels in his possession?"

"I am not surprised," I said coolly. "My father always told me that a good many of them were missing."

"I found them in a safe at the Presidency," he continued. "There has not been time to obtain an expert opinion, but they are apparently of great value, and are certainly a part of the royal

collection. Should we be pressed for funds, your Majesty would have no objection to my raising money on them?"

"None at all," I said generously. "As far as I am concerned, every krona that the Schönborns possess is at the service of the State."

Before Strovno could reply, Lindenfelt re-entered the hall, and, dropping the stump of the cigar which I had been smoking, I got up from my chair.

"There is only one thing I am sorry about, gentlemen," I observed, "and that is that I am not coming with you."

In an approving and almost fatherly manner the general laid his hand on my shoulder.

"You will have other opportunities of showing your courage, sir. At the present moment your life is too valuable to be unnecessarily risked." He turned to Lindenfelt. "I have no doubt that every possible arrangement has been made for His Majesty's comfort and security?"

"I have done what I can," was the colonel's answer. "Jacob will patrol the grounds at night, and there is at least enough in the house to eat and drink."

He stepped to the door, which he threw open,

and then, coming back to where I was standing, dropped down on one knee.

"If we should not meet again, sir, it is my last wish that your Majesty's reign shall be a long and happy one."

I gave him my hand, which he raised to his lips.

"There would be one great regret in it, anyhow," I replied.

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For several seconds Charles and Fritz sat staring at me in silence. Then the latter cleared his throat.

"If you will allow me, sir," he remarked, "I should like to offer you my congratulations. You appear to have got out of a very awkward situation with extraordinary success."

"It was mostly luck," I said modestly. "If things hadn't turned out as they did, I should probably have made a frightful hash of it."

"Well, I'm not given to paying compliments," broke in Charles, "but I must say, Dick, that for once in my life I take off my hat to you. The way you handled those two merchants was an absolute masterpiece."

"We've got what we wanted at all events," I

said. "If this news is right and Maren is really at the Schloss Brunn, I don't give a damn for all the generals in Dolgaria."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Do?" I asked. "Why, go there and see her, of course. Isn't that what we've come for?"

Charles rubbed the tip of his nose thoughtfully.

"I'm not very well up in Schlosses," he observed, "but aren't they rather difficult places to get into?"

"We'd better ask Fritz," I said. "This is his part of the world, so he can probably tell us all about it."

There was a pause.

"I take it that you are speaking seriously, sir," said Fritz. "You really do intend to try and get into communication with the young lady?"

"Naturally," I replied. "It's the whole object for which we're risking our necks."

"Then, with your permission, I should like to offer you a suggestion."

"Let's hear it by all means," I said.

"I know the Schloss Brunn," he continued. "It is about fifteen miles over the frontier and stands on a hill close to the river. There is only one road by which you can reach it, and you can

take it from me, sir, that no stranger would stand the slightest chance of entering the grounds without being seen."

Charles nodded gloomily. "Just as I expected," he remarked.

"What I should advise," proceeded Fritz, "is that before you attempt anything yourself, you should allow me to make a few investigations. At present we are not even sure that the young lady is really there. If I were to start soon after midnight, I could get to the Schloss early in the morning, and be back here again by to-morrow evening. I should then be able to let you know how things stand, and we could arrange our plans accordingly."

Charles leaned forward and slapped our retainer on the shoulder.

"You're a damned fine sport, Fritz," he said admiringly. "Upon my soul, you ought to be an Englishman."

"It's not a bad notion," I admitted, "but I'm hanged if I see why you should run into all that danger, just to oblige us."

"You needn't worry, sir," replied Fritz. "As a matter of fact, I am rather partial to a little adventure."

Charles grinned. "I like that," he said; "it

would make a good motto for the Royal Air Force."

"How would you find your way through the forest?" I asked. "It isn't light till nearly four o'clock."

"My intention was to use the motor-launch that you were telling us about, sir. I don't know if you have the key of the boat-house, but——"

"Yes," I said, "I've got that. Colonel Lindenfelt handed it to me just as he was stepping into the car." I turned to Charles. "What do you think?" I asked. "There's something in this idea of a little preliminary scouting, but, whatever Fritz says, it's not going to be a particularly healthy job. It seems to me that one of us ought to go with him."

"Right you are," said Charles. "I should love a little exercise after being cramped up in that beastly car."

"So should I!" I objected. "After all——"

"You will pardon me, gentlemen," interrupted Fritz, "but in a business like this I fancy that I should be better by myself. I am a native of these parts, and I understand how to talk to the people. I can make inquiries amongst the peasants, and should there be any visitors staying at the Schloss you may be pretty sure that I

shall get to hear of it." He paused. "There is also another point which I think you have overlooked. If anyone should come over from Dolgrade to-morrow with a message from General Strovno, he would naturally expect to find you both here."

It was impossible to deny the soundness of his argument, and for several seconds neither Charles nor I were able to find an answer.

"Well, it's devilish good of you, Fritz," I said at last. "I don't feel I've any right to accept your offer, but, since you've been sporting enough to make it, I suppose we must let you go." I glanced at the clock above the fireplace. "What I do absolutely insist on," I added, "is that you should have a rest before you start. You trot off to your room at once and get a couple of hours' sleep. Mr. Grant and I will stop here, and at twelve o'clock one of us will come and wake you up."

Fritz made me a slight bow and rose to his feet.

"There's just one other thing which has occurred to me, sir. It's not likely that I shall have a chance of speaking to the young lady, but should the opportunity arise it would be as well that I should have some means of convincing

her that I am acting in your interests. In the present circumstances she is bound to be a trifle suspicious."

I put my hand in my waistcoat pocket and pulled out the little Maltese cross which Maren had given me.

"You can show her this," I said. "Only for God's sake don't lose it. I value it more than anything else in the world."

He produced a small silver tobacco-box from his pocket, and, opening the lid, placed the trinket inside.

"I will take the utmost care of it, sir," he said gravely.

CHAPTER XV

FOR the third time Charles got up from his chair and, walking to the window, peered out into the dusk.

After a few minutes he came sauntering back and threw himself down moodily on the sofa.

"I don't like the look of it, Dick," he said. "He ought to have been here long before this."

"It's only just after nine," I pointed out. "Twenty-five miles is a pretty long way to come, and there's always a chance that he may have had trouble with the launch."

"I hope to God it's nothing worse," said Charles. "D'you know, I'm beginning to feel quite fond of old Fritz. For a dago, he's one of the whitest men I've ever met."

"Don't talk like that," I said. "It reminds me of Robert W. Service."

Charles pulled out a pipe from his pocket and commenced stuffing it with tobacco.

"It's sitting here doing nothing that upsets me," he observed. "If we could only hear how things are going in Dolgrade——" He paused abruptly. "What's that?" he demanded.

We had jumped to our feet at the unexpected sound, and for several seconds we both stood tense and motionless. Then the trees beyond the garden wall were lit by a sudden bright glare: there was a scrape and a bump in the road outside, and the next instant a bell jangled loudly.

"Sounds to me like a motor-bicycle," I said. "I shouldn't be surprised if you're going to get your wish."

I moved over in the direction of the fireplace, and as I did so the massive white bearded figure

of Jacob Schwartz emerged from the back regions.

“Our visitor seems to be in a bit of a hurry, Jacob,” I said. “If it’s anyone from General Strovno, bring him in at once.”

Crossing the hall, the old man opened the door and walked through to the outer gate. There was a brief rumble of voices, and then with an obviously excited air he came hurrying back into the light accompanied by a tall, youthful-looking stranger, clad in a dust-stained uniform.

“It is Lieutenant Otto Lindenfelt, sir; his Excellence’s cousin.”

I had recognised the likeness at once, and, as the young man drew himself up in a stiff salute, I stepped forward and held out my hand.

“Then he is doubly welcome,” I said.

Lieutenant Lindenfelt’s face went an agreeable pink, and, raising my fingers almost reverently, he just touched them with his lips.

“Your Majesty is very kind,” he stammered. “It is a great honour that I should have been selected for this service.”

“You have brought me a message from the general?” I inquired.

He unbuttoned his tunic and, after fumbling

hurriedly inside, dragged out a somewhat dilapidated envelope.

"It was written about an hour ago, sir, just after the town was cleared. I was to deliver it into your own hands."

I moved towards the lighted candle which was standing on the table and, breaking the seal, extracted the contents. There was only a single sheet of notepaper, covered on both sides in a bold and rather illegible scrawl.

"Dolgrade, 8.30.

"Knowing that your Majesty must be anxious to hear the result of to-day's events, I am sending this brief dispatch by Lieutenant Lindenfelt.

"We attacked the lower quarter of the town shortly after dawn. During the previous night it had been strongly barricaded, and when our troops forced an entrance they encountered a very stubborn and obstinate resistance. Street fighting continued until nearly five o'clock this afternoon, by which time the great majority of the rebels were either dead or had else surrendered their arms. A few succeeded in making their escape into the country, and amongst these, I regret to say, was Bernstorff

himself. It is unfortunate, but I do not think he will be in a position to cause us much more trouble.

"The town is now quiet, and preparations are being hurried forward for your Majesty's entrance. Should nothing unforeseen occur, the ceremony will take place at mid-day to-morrow.

"With repeated assurance of my loyalty and devotion,

"I have the honour to be,

"Your Majesty's humble servant,

"HELMUTZ STROVNO."

I looked up from the straggling signature to the bearer of the message.

"Were you in the fighting?"

The boy nodded cheerfully. "I was with my cousin, sir, who commanded the assault."

"I hope Colonel Lindenfelt is all right?" I said.

"He was slightly wounded in the left arm, sir—nothing in the least serious. Those fellows were only the scum and dregs of the town, but they fought like cornered rats."

"Yes," I said, "I gather from this letter that it's been quite a busy day. You had better sit

down for a little and have a rest and a drink."

Lieutenant Lindenfelt bowed. "I thank your Majesty, but my orders were that I was to return immediately and report to the general."

"Well, I suppose we mustn't keep you, then," I replied. "Give my compliments and thanks to your cousin and General Strovno, and tell them that I am looking forward to to-morrow with the utmost eagerness." I turned to Charles. "Come along," I added in English. "We'll go outside and see this bright lad off."

Followed by the two others, I led the way across the garden to where our visitor's lighted motor-cycle was leaning against the wall. It was a still, starry night, and on the crest of the opposite slope the great sweep of forest trees looked blacker and more impenetrable than ever.

Making us a respectful adieu, the lieutenant wheeled out his machine through the gateway, and, having adjusted a pair of goggles, stamped down the starting lever. Then, with a final salute, he swung his leg over the saddle, and a moment later we were watching the red glow of his retreating tail-lamp as he spluttered away furiously up the road.

"Smart-looking fellow, that," said Charles.

"Just the right build for a golfer." He seated himself on an old stone mounting-block which stood beside the entrance and relit his pipe. "I heard you burbling about Strovno," he added, "so I suppose that message was from him?"

"It was only a line," I explained. "A nice chatty little note saying that he'd mopped up the rebels, and that I'm expected to make my official appearance about mid-day to-morrow."

Charles stared at me for a second in silence. "Sounds a bit awkward," he observed. "How shall we manage if Fritz doesn't get back?"

"I shall give him till daylight," I replied, "and then I shall make a shot at finding my way to the Schloss. I came here to see Maren, and I'm hanged if I'm going to leave without doing it."

"We can try, anyhow," agreed Charles. "Personally, I think it's much more probable that we shall finish up like the babes in the wood. I hope to goodness they breed robins in this part of the world."

I hesitated. "As a matter of fact, Charles," I said, "I had some idea of making this particular trip on my own."

"On your own?" he repeated. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Well, as Fritz said," I persisted, "it's one of

those jobs where a man is really safer and better off by himself. My suggestion is that as soon as I've started you hop quietly into Lindenfelt's car and paddle back to the frontier. You know the road to Strelsburg, and when you get there you can go to the Station Hotel and wait for me. I don't suppose I shall be more than a couple of days behind you."

Charles yawned and got up from the mounting-block.

"If you can't think of any better suggestion than that," he said, "we may as well go in and have a drink."

I made one more effort. "You might try to be reasonable," I urged. "Think what my feelings would be if anything happened to you."

He grinned cheerfully. "Do you imagine that I'm going to spoil my holiday for the sake of your damned feelings? I tell you I'm in with you on this, Dick, right up to the eighteenth hole. All I'm sorry about is that we can't accept old Strovno's invitation for to-morrow. I'd give my head to see you prancing into the town with strong men sobbing and pretty girls bunging flowers at you."

"If I were sure that they'd only be flowers——" I began, but the sentence, like so

many other human efforts, was never completed. From the dark background of trees opposite a solitary figure had suddenly lurched out into the open and was already beginning to stumble down the slope. Even at that distance we could see plainly enough that it was Fritz, and never in my life has the sight of a fellow-creature inspired me with such an unspeakable thrill of relief.

CHAPTER XVI

“NOT a lot, Charles,” I said. “Just about two fingers and the same amount of water.”

He splashed out the required mixture, and, hurrying back to the sofa where Fritz and I were sitting, handed me the tumbler.

“You lap this up slowly,” I said to my patient, “and don’t try to talk until you’ve finished the last drop.”

Fritz took the glass and, raising it to his lips with a shaking hand, obediently carried out my instructions. As the brandy disappeared the colour began to steal back into his face, and with

a final gulp he sat up and smiled at us a little wanly.

"Feeling better now?" I inquired.

He nodded. "Much better, thank you, sir. I am sorry to have given you all this trouble."

"The only thing you gave us was a fright," I said. "When you flopped down like that I thought there was going to be a funeral."

"It was stupid of me, sir," he said apologetically, "but as a matter of fact I had a slight accident coming up from the boat-house. In the dark I stumbled over the root of a tree and knocked my head rather badly against the trunk. I think I must have been half stunned, because I remember nothing more until I saw you gentlemen waiting for me at the gate."

"Well, I don't believe brandy is the correct treatment for a crack on the skull," I said, "but it certainly seems to have worked in your case." I took away the glass and placed it on the table. "Perhaps you had better lie quiet for a little while," I said.

"No, no, I am really all right, sir. There is nothing wrong with me now except a slight headache; and, besides, I have some important news which I think you ought to hear immediately."

"Very well, Fritz," I said soothingly. "Only take it easy and don't excite yourself." I went to the front door, which we had left open, and, having closed it, came back and sat down beside him. Charles pulled up a chair facing us and straddled himself across it.

"General Strovno's statement was perfectly accurate," began Fritz in his usual calm and deliberate manner. "The young lady is at the Schloss, sir: I have not only seen her, but have actually spoken with her."

I felt my heart give a sudden jump, but by a big effort I managed to maintain my composure.

"Go on," I said quietly.

"Perhaps it would be simplest if I told you the whole story. When I left here, as you remember, it was still quite dark. I had some difficulty in finding the path to the boat-house, but I got there at last, and, after a little trouble with the carburetter—it's an American make which I don't understand—I was able to start up the launch. The chief thing that worried me then was the danger of running aground. There are a lot of bad shallows in the river, and, as a matter of fact, I did touch the bottom in one or two places, but each time I was lucky enough to get off. When I was about a mile from the Schloss I left the boat

under some trees and took to the woods again. It was growing light by then, and before I had gone very far I came across an old man who was chopping sticks in a clearing outside his hut. I told him that I was a tourist from Dolgrade, and that I had lost my way and been out all night in the forest. At first he was suspicious, but when he saw that I had money he asked me into the hut and gave me some cheese and bread. It wasn't difficult to get him to talk. Living close by, he naturally took an interest in what was going on at the Schloss, and he told me that the night before the Count's son had arrived in a motor-car with a young lady, and that as far as he knew they were both still there."

My fingers instinctively clenched. "Do you mean to say that she's alone with that beast Ivan?" I demanded.

"If you will be patient for a moment, sir," said Fritz, "you shall have all the information I can give you." He cleared his throat, and proceeded in the same dispassionate tone. "Having learned that we were on the right track, so to speak, sir, I decided that the best thing to do was to have a look round the Schloss for myself. As neither of you gentlemen know it, I should explain that it's a kind of old-fashioned castle,

something probably like this used to be before it was burned down. There is a high wall all round the grounds, except on the side facing the river, where the cliff is so steep that anyone who tried to climb up would be almost certain to break his neck.

"It must have been getting on for eight o'clock by this time, and of course I had to be careful what I was about. I didn't dare come out too far into the open, for fear of being seen and questioned. Fortunately there are several places where the forest has grown right up to the wall, and at one of these spots I was lucky enough to find the very thing I was looking for. It was a tree, sir—a tree that was just near enough to allow anyone who climbed it to see into the grounds."

He paused, and, producing a handkerchief, wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Have another drink?" suggested Charles solicitously.

"I would rather wait until I have finished, thank you all the same, sir. It wasn't an easy climb," he continued, "but I managed to work my way up somehow or other, and at last I got astride of a branch that hung right over the wall. From there I could see one side of the Schloss

quite plainly. It's a gloomy-looking place all covered in creepers, and I was just wondering what I should do next when a door opened almost exactly opposite me, and out walked—if you will pardon my saying so, sir—as pretty a young lady as I've even seen in my life. I guessed from your description that it must be the Countess Stefanoff."

"Why do you call her the Countess?" demanded Charles.

Fritz shrugged his shoulders. "Because it is correct. In their own country all the Stefanoffs have a right to the title."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I did the only thing I could think of, sir. I whistled."

"You *what*?"

"Whistled to attract her attention."

Charles burst out laughing. "Gad," he said, "you've got a nerve."

"She seemed a little startled at first," went on Fritz, "and, seeing me lying there on the branch beckoning to her, it wasn't altogether surprising. However, it didn't take her long to make up her mind. She had a look up and down first, and then, without hurrying or anything of that sort, she just walked over quite coolly and slowly and

sat herself down on a stump right underneath me. 'Who are you?' she whispered, 'and what do you want?'

For a second time he stopped to dab his forehead, while Charles and I waited with an almost desperate impatience.

"Well, sir, I had what you might call an inspiration. I took that little silver cross you gave me out of my pocket, and dropped it down on the grass alongside of her. It was a bit of a shock in a manner of speaking, but you ought to have seen the change that came into her face."

"I wish to God I had," I said fervently.

"She seemed almost dazed at first, as if she couldn't believe it was true. Then she asked me again who I was, and I told her, if you'll excuse the liberty, that I was a friend of yours, sir, and that you'd come out all the way here on purpose to find her and speak to her. I could see she wanted to know a lot more, but, with the chance of someone turning up at any moment, there wasn't much time for asking questions. She just told me to give you a message: to say that to-morrow morning she would keep a look-out from her bedroom—she showed me the window, sir—and that if you could be in the same place

at about the same time, you might be able to do her a great service."

"She said that!" I exclaimed. "Those very words?"

"As far as I could hear, sir. She didn't speak hardly above a whisper. She was very frightened, and all she seemed to be thinking of was that I should get away before anyone came along and found us."

There was a pause.

"I don't understand," I said. "Surely something else must have happened, or you would have been back here long before this?"

"Something else did happen," replied Fritz a trifle grimly. "When I got to the river again I found a party of between twenty and thirty soldiers lying about on the bank within a few hundred yards of where I'd hidden the launch."

I sat up sharply. "Soldiers!" I said. "Do you mean some of Strovno's men?"

"No, sir; they were Crutanians: peasants from the hills by the look of them. They had a uniform of sorts, but they certainly weren't regulars."

Charles glanced at me. "A little precaution of Stefanoff's, I expect. He's probably sent them along to keep an eye on your damsel."

"It put me in a bit of a difficulty," continued Fritz. "Of course, I could have left the launch and found my way back through the forest, but I knew we should be wanting it to-night to get up the river. The only other thing to do was to wait until the soldiers went away."

"And how long was that?" I inquired.

"Not until quite late in the afternoon. They marched off then in the direction of the Schloss, but whether they actually entered the grounds I can't say. I didn't waste any time, sir; I just tumbled into the launch and started back as quick as I could."

For a moment we all sat silent.

"Thank you very much, Fritz," I said; "you've done simply splendidly."

Charles nodded. "Wonderful," he agreed. "Plenty of blokes have got the V.C. for a lot less than that."

I looked at my watch and then jumped up from the sofa.

"We've heaps of time," I began. "It's only ten o'clock, and if we leave here sharp at one——"

"That will be quite early enough, sir," broke in Fritz. "Now I know the way, it won't take us more than five hours at the very outside."

"Well, you had better find yourself something

to eat and then lie down until we start," I said. "You must be absolutely tired out, and God knows when we shall get our next chance of a nap."

He rose to his feet. "I will just pack your things first, sir. I take it that whatever happens you have no intention of coming back here?"

"We'll talk about that in the launch," I returned. "You push off at once, and don't you stir from your bed till either Mr. Grant or I come and call you."

I shepherded him firmly to the door, and, having closed it behind him, came back to where Charles was sitting.

"Have you seen Jacob?" I asked.

"I believe he's outside," was the answer. "He was prowling round the place with a gun until nearly five o'clock this morning, and he evidently means to do the same to-night. Lindenfelt's orders, I suppose."

"We must get him into the house somehow before we start," I said.

"That will be easy enough," replied Charles. "I'll give him a shout about midnight, and tell him that Fritz and I are going to carry on for a bit. He'll be quite ready to oblige—you bet your boots!"

"There's no point in our both sitting up," I

said. "You turn in, too, and see if you can get a couple of hours' sleep."

"How about you?" he inquired.

I shook my head. "I couldn't sleep if I tried. I'm too worried about Maren."

"Keep your pecker up," he returned. "Things can't be as bad as they look or she'd never have sent you that message. If we've any luck we may all be out of this blasted country by to-morrow night."

He rose from his chair, and, having replenished his tumbler, sauntered off slowly towards the staircase. At the top, he turned and looked down over the banisters. "Better make it a quarter to twelve," he added. "I'd like to have a shave before I'm introduced."

As his bedroom door closed, I dropped back into my former position on the sofa, and sat there staring across the empty hall.

I felt rather like a man who has suddenly stumbled up against a miracle. Considering the odds we had had to face, it seemed hardly credible that the end of my quest could really be so close at hand. There was, indeed, something positively uncanny about the way in which one circumstance after another had apparently conspired to help us. One could almost believe that,

staggered by the sheer impudence of our undertaking, the gods themselves had stepped in and were battling on our behalf.

Interesting as these speculations might be, however, I had other and more urgent matters to engage my attention. Whether we succeeded or failed, there could be no disguising the fact that in deserting our present quarters we were irrevocably burning our boats. Directly he discovered our absence, Jacob would no doubt find some means of communicating with his master, and it needed little imagination to picture the state of frantic commotion which the news of my disappearance would produce in Dolgrade. Strovno and his friends would set to work instantly. Search-parties and telephone messages would be dispatched in every direction, and, unless we managed to make our escape across the Austrian frontier, it would only be a matter of time before we were run to earth.

For a moment the whole craziness of our adventure stood out before me in its true light: then, with a laugh and a sudden shrug of my shoulders, I pulled myself together. What was I worrying about, when the very object for which I had been prepared to risk everything was at last within my reach? Maren was found—that

was the only thing that mattered—and in a few hours I should again be holding her hands and looking into her face.

That she needed me, and needed me badly, was too obvious to be questioned. Utterly bewildered as she must have been at the sight of that little trinket, it had evidently come to her as a more than welcome message. She had not hesitated to send for me, and the urgency of her words showed that, no matter what was happening elsewhere, something was decidedly wrong at the Schloss Brunn.

Was it possible that her eyes were already opened? I had felt sure from the first that Stefanoff was merely using her for his own ends, and that as soon as the time arrived he would have no hesitation in throwing off the mask. If he had done so, if she now realised that the fate of her country was in the hands of a pair of worthless scoundrels, I could well imagine the dread and misery with which she must be facing the future.

One thing I was resolved on : even if it meant breaking my word to Karl, I would put an end to this miserable deception. When I saw her I would tell her the whole story. Whatever other effect it might have, it would at least convince

her that there was no danger of a Schönborn sitting upon the throne of Crutania. She should hear the truth from my own lips, and then, if there were any other way in which I could serve her, God knew that I was ready enough to do it.

With a sudden feeling of restless impatience I got up from the sofa. There were still a couple of hours ahead of us before we need start, and it occurred to me that instead of dawdling about doing nothing I might as well adopt Charles's suggestion—take the opportunity of having a shave and a bath. It would probably be some time before I could again indulge in either of these luxuries, and, although I am not fussy about trifles, I had no wish to appear before Maren looking like an unwashed tramp.

Making my way up the staircase, I opened my door quietly so as not to disturb Charles. The room was flooded in moonlight, and, without troubling for the moment to light a candle, I walked over to the window and stood looking out into the peaceful world beneath me. Lapped in a silver silence, with that great sweep of dark trees in the background, its strange beauty held me in a kind of stilled enchantment.

My eyes wandered across the stretch of open grass beyond the garden paling, and on the farther

side of it I caught sight of a moving figure. It was old Jacob Schwartz on his solitary night patrol. He carried a double-barrelled shot-gun tucked under his arm, and was pacing along slowly within a few yards of the forest.

I watched him idly for several seconds, and then, taking out a box of matches from my pocket, turned back to the dressing-table. As I did so, I heard the sharp crack of a revolver. I swung round again instantly, and an involuntary gasp broke from my lips. There on the grass, in the very spot where Jacob had been last standing, sprawled a black and motionless body.

Almost before I had realised what had happened, a man crept forward from amongst the trees. He crouched there in the moonlight staring at the lifeless heap in front of him, and then, rising to his feet, he slowly lifted his arm. One by one other shapes began to appear. They stole out singly and silently like so many phantoms, and in a few minutes the whole of the front of the wood was dotted by a line of lurking shadows.

It did not take me long to grasp the situation. I jerked myself away, cannoning violently against the dressing-table, and in a couple of swift strides I had reached the door which led into

Charles's room. As I flung it open, he started up from the bed.

"What the hell——"

"Come to the window," I said.

He sprang up at once, and the next moment he was standing behind me, staring over my shoulder.

"Great Scott!" he whispered. "Who are they?"

"Can't tell you," I replied. "All I know is that they shot Jacob down like a dog."

He whistled softly. "Damn the swine!" he said. "I liked old Jacob."

"You'll have to hurry, Charles," I continued. "We've only one chance—that's the underground passage. Get your boots on while I go and collect Fritz."

I took the staircase three steps at a time, but, before I reached the hall, the side door swung back and Fritz himself appeared in the opening. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and had the slightly dazed air of a man who has only just awakened.

"What is it, sir? I thought I heard a shot."

"You did," I assured him. "There's a whole bunch of armed men outside—twenty or thirty of them. They've murdered Jacob, and they evidently mean to rush the house."

He gave a slight start, but recovered himself immediately.

"The passage, sir. Do they know of that?"

"We'll hope not," I said. "Hop into your things, and for the love of Mike be quick about it."

Without another word he dived back through the doorway, and, hurrying across to the fireplace, I pressed the stone knob. As I did so, Charles came sauntering unconcernedly down the stairs.

"We needn't burst our boilers," he announced. "They won't be here just yet. They're spreading out all round the house so as to cut us off."

He walked forward and picked up the brandy, while inch by inch the big stone began to swing slowly back.

"May as well take this," he observed, slipping the bottle into his pocket. "There's a lot left, and I should hate those blighters to have it."

Buttoning his coat as he came, Fritz re-emerged from the back regions. Except for his hair being a trifle disordered, he seemed as calm and collected as usual.

"You two had better go first," I said. "As soon as you're through I'll start the thing

working. 'There'll be plenty of time to get out before it shuts.'

Fritz stepped quietly towards the table. "I think it would be advisable to put out the lights, sir. We don't want to be seen from outside."

I nodded, and, extinguishing the two candles which I had left burning, he groped his way back to my side.

"Are you ready, sir?" he asked.

"Quite," I said. "Let me know when you're both clear."

For what seemed like a small slice of eternity I stood there by the mantelpiece; then a low whistle suddenly reached my ears, and with a quick jab I pressed down the knob. One step brought me to the opening, where I could feel that the stone was already beginning to move. There was still just room to squeeze through, however, and in another instant my feet were on the ladder and I was scrambling down rung by rung into a black and evil-smelling darkness.

As I reached the bottom, someone took me by the arm.

"Here we are," whispered Charles's voice. "A bit frowsty, isn't it?"

There was a faint click, and a light flashed in our faces. It came from a small electric torch

which Fritz had apparently produced from his pocket.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"I brought it with me from the villa, sir. I had an idea that it might come in handy."

He swung the beam slowly round, and we saw that we were standing in a low-roofed circular cellar, the walls of which were lined with damp brick. A few feet ahead of us loomed the entrance to a narrow tunnel.

"Well, it's a queer world," said Charles philosophically. "I never thought I should end up by being suffocated in a rabbit-hole."

"There must be some sort of ventilation," I objected. "Anyhow, it's better than stopping here and having our throats cut."

"There will only be room for one of us at a time, sir," remarked Fritz. "If you have no objection, I would suggest that I should go first and light the way."

"By all means," I agreed. "You follow him, Charles, and for heaven's sake be careful with that brandy."

As a mining engineer it has been my lot to explore a large number of underground workings, some of which have certainly not erred either from the point of view of comfort or salubrity.

Looking back, however, I shall always regard that two hundred yard crawl as the most unpleasant experience of my life. To begin with, the passage was so low that it was only by bending almost double that we were able to get along at all. Even then I was constantly bumping my head against the roof, while Charles, who is an inch taller and totally unused to this sort of work, was naturally in a still worse plight than myself.

To add to our misery, we were practically unable to breathe. Such air as there was would have sickened a sewer rat. It was about as refreshing as a lungful of poison gas, while the heat was so intense that, before I had taken a dozen steps, the perspiration was running down my forehead and trickling into my eyes.

Yard by yard we groped and blundered our way along until at length a half-stifled cry of encouragement from Fritz told us that we were nearing the end. Gradually the air became a shade better, and then the black bulk in front of me which was Charles suddenly vanished, and, lurching out into the open, I stumbled over his legs and collapsed helplessly alongside of him.

“A very nasty place to be trapped in, sir. I

should say that it had not been used for some considerable time."

The familiar voice roused me from my stupor, and, struggling up into a sitting position, I looked vaguely about me. By the light of Fritz's torch I discovered that we were in a similar sort of chamber to the one at the opposite end of the tunnel. Clamped to the wall was another iron ladder, the rungs of which disappeared upwards through a shaft in the roof.

I bent down over Charles, who was lying stretched out at full length with his head pillowed on his arms.

"Feeling bad?" I asked him.

He rolled sideways on to his elbow and raised a blackened and perspiring face.

"Where are we?" he inquired. "Earl's Court or West Kensington?"

"It's the end of the damned place anyhow," I replied. "We've only got to climb that ladder and we shall be out in the fresh air."

With a deep sigh he sat up and, fumbling at his side pocket, dragged out the brandy. To my amazement, the bottle was still unbroken.

"You'll forgive my helping myself first," he remarked. "As that fellow, what's-his-name, said, 'My need is greater than yours.'"

He gulped down a couple of mouthfuls, and then, handing over the remainder, waited silently while Fritz and I followed his example. It was genuine fifty-year-old Courvoisier, and it seemed to put new life into all three of us.

"Well, it's no use sitting around here," I said, getting on to my feet. "I'm going to open that trap-door."

"Where does it lead to?" asked Charles.

"It leads into a cave," I explained. "According to Lindenfelt, there's a path from there which runs down to the boat-house."

"That's quite correct, sir," put in Fritz. "It must be the one I came back by this evening. I remember passing a big pile of rocks just as I reached the clearing."

"And what's the programme?" demanded Charles. "Do we toddle off to this Schloss place straight away?"

I nodded. "The sooner we're out of this the better," I said. "I'll just have a look round first, so as to make sure that the coast's clear. If I'm not back in about ten minutes, you and Fritz can come and look for me."

I walked across to the foot of the ladder and peered up the shaft. All that met my eyes was a discouraging blackness, and, with a momentary

wonder as to what awaited me at the top, I clutched hold of a rusty iron rung and commenced the ascent.

I should think that I must have climbed between thirty and forty feet when my long-suffering head suddenly came in contact with something distressingly hard. It was the trap-door right enough, and, after feeling around in the dark until I had discovered and unfastened the bolt, I very cautiously and silently pushed up the flap. Then, still holding it with my hand, I stood there staring about me.

I was in a kind of natural cavern, the roof of which was just sufficiently high to allow a fully grown man to stand upright. It sloped down at one end into a low archway, where a pile of stones and dead bracken had apparently been heaped up in order to conceal the entrance. The walls were of solid rock, but in the one nearest to me, about five feet from the floor, there stretched a long, narrow fissure, through which the moon peeped in like a friendly face, flooding the whole interior with its welcome light.

I stepped out of the shaft and lowered back the flap until it rested on the floor. Somewhere in the distance I could hear a murmur of confused sound—a vague, sinister noise not unlike the

rustling and moaning of trees. It seemed to come from the direction of the house, and, after listening breathlessly for several seconds, I tiptoed across to the opening in the rock and stealthily raised my head.

The sight which greeted me was so grimly humorous that if it had not been for Jacob's dead body still sprawling there stiffly on the grass I believe I should have burst out laughing. I was looking down on what was evidently intended to be my own funeral pyre. For the second time in its chequered history Lindenfelt's family mansion was illuminating the countryside. Great gouts of smoke and flame poured from its lower windows, while all round, strung out in a wide circle with rifles at their shoulders, crouched a motionless ring of hopeful if misguided assassins.

Such was my absorption in the spectacle that for a few minutes I remained there oblivious to everything else. Then a sudden shuffling movement attracted my attention, and, glancing hastily around, I discovered that Fritz and Charles had followed me up the ladder. In another moment they were both standing beside me.

If I remember rightly, it was Fritz who spoke first.

"I fancy they must be Socialists of some sort, sir," he whispered. "They seem so unnecessarily destructive."

"It's a wicked waste," agreed Charles sadly. "Just think what we could get for the film rights."

I stepped back, pulling him away from the opening.

"Come and shift those stones," I said curtly. "What we've got to think about is a damned quick exit."

CHAPTER XVII

KEEPING well in under the opposite shore, we chugged our way steadily round a low-lying bend, where an ugly-looking spit of sand jutted out almost into mid-stream. Empty and chill in the grey light of early dawn, the broad river stretched away ahead of us.

With a slight shiver Charles turned up his collar.

"Are we getting anywhere near?" he inquired.

"You see those trees, sir?" Fritz pointed

towards a dark mass of foliage which overhung the bank on our right. "That's where I laid her up yesterday," he continued. "It's about a mile from here to the Schloss, and, if you ask my opinion, you can't do better than to follow the same plan."

I nodded my agreement. "Take her in by all means," I said. "Now that the light's come it would be madness to go any farther."

Looking at my watch, I saw that it was close on four o'clock. Ever since midnight, when, after a blindfold journey through the blackness of the forest, Fritz had at last brought us safely to the boat-house, we had been crouching watchfully in the open well of our frail craft amid a ceaseless turmoil of dark and swirling water. Whatever natural beauties the Ibar might possess, it was certainly a poisonous stream to navigate. Shallows and sandbanks infested the whole length of its swiftly running current, and, although Fritz had steered with excellent judgment, we had, on more than one occasion, been perilously close to disaster.

It was therefore not without considerable relief that I found myself ducking down to avoid the low-growing branches, beneath whose gloomy shade we were soon forcing a passage.

For anyone in search of privacy the place was an ideal refuge. There was just room enough for a small boat to lie up in comfort, while so thick was the leafy screen which sheltered it from the river that not even the most argus-eyed passer-by could possibly have detected our presence.

Leaning over the side as we approached the bank, I made fast to a convenient stump.

"Quite a nice spot," observed Charles, "but we seem to have arrived a little before our time. What do you propose to do for the next three hours? Sit here and play nap?"

He lighted a cigarette and held out the case to me.

I shook my head. "You can have five minutes for a smoke," I said. "After that we start for the Schloss."

"But why hurry ourselves?" he objected. "It's no use getting there before the girl's awake."

"She may be awake now," I returned. "Anyhow, I mean to go along and find out." I paused. "I've been thinking pretty hard the last few miles, Charles," I continued, "and it strikes me that we're in a damned tight corner."

He nodded with a kind of mock gravity.

"I've come to something of the same conclusion myself."

"If that bunch that burned the house down were really Republicans," I went on, "you can bet your last penny that they won't keep the glad news a secret. As likely as not it's already known in Dolgrade."

"What do you suppose they'll do?" he inquired. "It must be some job cancelling a coronation."

"Well, put yourself in Lindenfelt's place," I said. "The first thing he'll think about will be the secret passage. He'll come dashing frantically over in the hope that we've escaped, and, sure enough, he'll find the boat-house open and the launch gone. Why, man, he'll turn the country upside down to find us."

With an apologetic cough, Fritz broke into the dialogue.

"You'll excuse me, sir," he remarked, "but has it occurred to you that the people who attacked us may have been the same party of soldiers that I saw here yesterday?"

I looked at him for a moment in silence. "Wouldn't you have recognised them?" I asked.

"I only had a glimpse, and it was too dark to see what they were wearing. As far as I could

judge, there were about the same number of them."

"You may be right," I said, after a pause. "If old Stefanoff knew that I was at the lodge, it's just the sort of happy idea that would probably strike him. I shouldn't be surprised if our friend Ivan was in command of the party."

"I hope I run across him again before I die," said Charles wistfully. "I should like to have a few words with him about that crawl through the tunnel."

"There's one very obvious thing," I said, jumping to my feet. "If Fritz is right, it's more important than ever that we should push off at once. Now the work's done, those fellows will be on their way back."

Charles dropped his cigarette into the water. "It's a restless life," he remarked, "but I shouldn't wonder if it's improving my golf."

We climbed out on to the beach, and, having made certain that the launch was securely fastened, Fritz began rummaging about in the afterlocker.

"Looking for something?" I asked.

He produced a coil of thin rope and a couple of spanners, and, thus equipped, he followed us ashore.

"I hope that you won't need it, sir," he observed, handing one of the latter to Charles. "All the same, it's a useful sort of thing to have in one's pocket."

He offered the other to me.

"You stick to it, Fritz," I said. "If it comes to a scrap, I'd rather trust to my fists."

"What's the rope for?" inquired Charles. "To hang Stefanoff with?"

"That's in case we want to enter the grounds, sir. It would be a difficult business getting back, especially if the young lady were with us."

I stared up the bank into a green vista of leaves, where, except for the faint chirping of birds, everything was silent.

"It seems a nice quiet neighbourhood," I said. "I suppose we're not likely to meet anyone, unless we happen to run into that old peasant of yours?"

Fritz shook his head. "Very little chance of it, I should think, sir. The only other building I saw besides that hut of his was a small wooden chapel, which looks as though it had been shut up for some time. I fancy that all this part of the forest belongs to the Schloss."

"Then let's make a start," I suggested.

Without further delay, we dropped into single

file, and, following him up the slope, edged our way in amongst the straggling undergrowth. As we did so, the twittering and rustling of the birds abruptly ceased, and a kind of ominous hush seemed to descend upon the whole woodland.

How on earth Fritz managed to keep his bearings I haven't the foggiest notion. I had completely lost all sense of direction before we had gone more than a couple of hundred yards, but, despite the dim light and the entire absence of anything resembling a path, he continued to press forward with every appearance of complete confidence.

It struck me that he must be taking a slightly different route, for, although we passed several stretches of open clearing, we came across nothing in the shape either of a chapel or a hut. On one occasion I noticed a recently felled tree trunk lying where it had fallen, but except for this evidence we might have been as far from any human habitation as three explorers in a primeval jungle.

At last, just as I was beginning to wonder how much farther we had to go, a dark grey mass loomed up suddenly in front of us. A minute later Fritz came to a halt, and, taking care to make

as little noise as possible, Charles and I crept stealthily forward to where he was standing.

We found ourselves confronted by a solid-looking stone wall about twenty feet in height, the coping on its top being plentifully studded with a bristling array of broken glass. Although when built it had evidently been clear of the forest, years of apparent neglect had begun to tell their tale. Bushes and brambles encumbered its base, and a few yards to our right an impertinent fir-tree had grown up in such close proximity that one of its upper branches actually rested upon the parapet.

"This is the place, sir," whispered Fritz. "If you can climb up as far as that bough, I will show you the young lady's window."

I measured the task with my eye. "I think it might be managed," I said hopefully. "Do you mind prowling around and keeping a look-out, Charles?"

He nodded. "Supposing anyone comes along, what do I do? Biff him with the spanner?"

"If you don't mind," I said. "It's one of those occasions when we can't afford to be polite."

Fritz stepped forward, and, with that indefinable thrill which the thought of seeing Maren

always produced in my heart, I followed him to the foot of the tree.

"Perhaps I'd better go first, sir," he suggested. "Then if you want it I can give you a hand."

I signalled my agreement, and, hoisting himself up with the activity of a monkey, he proceeded to climb steadily from fork to fork, until he had reached the particular branch which jutted out over the wall. There he halted, and, in a fervent hope that it would bear the additional weight of my twelve stone six, I caught hold of the slender trunk and started in pursuit of him.

As I drew level with where he was sitting, he edged out along the bough in order to make room for me.

"There you are, sir," he whispered; "that's the Schloss Brunn. Nasty sort of place for a young lady to be shut up in."

I peered over the wall at the grim and rather fantastic-looking building, which stood dark and silent in its neglected grounds. It was not unlike one of those illustrations of the ogre's castle which you sometimes come across in an old-fashioned fairy story—an inhospitable pile of massive masonry, with pointed turrets and a high, irregular roof. Such windows as it possessed were half hidden beneath a thick mat of

creeper, which, either through the laziness or indifference of its owners, had apparently been allowed to flourish unchecked.

I bent down until my lips were close to Fritz's ear.

"Which is the room?" I asked.

"Up above the door; the one with the two windows."

He pointed to a spot at least thirty feet from the ground, and for a moment my hopes were a trifle dashed. Then, as I examined it more carefully, a sudden inspiration occurred to me.

"What about the creeper?" I whispered. "Do you think it's strong enough to bear my weight?"

He looked at me with a slightly startled expression.

"You're not proposing to try and climb it, sir?"

"Yes, I am," I returned. "I've got to see her, and if we hang about here doing nothing those swine may be back before she wakes up."

There was a pause.

"It's taking a big risk," he muttered, "but I'm not sure it mightn't be the best thing."

"We'll try it, anyhow," I said. "I can drop down from here, and it will be easy enough to get

back with the help of the rope. You change places with me, and look out you don't fall!"

By a little perilous juggling, we succeeded in swapping positions, and then wriggling my way forward, I managed to get one leg over the parapet.

"I won't be longer than I can help, Fritz," I whispered. "If anything should go wrong, I trust you to look after Mr. Grant."

"I will do my best, sir," he said quietly.

I took a tight grip of the branch in front of me, and, slithering off the top of the wall, lowered myself down until I was hanging by the full stretch of my arms. The distance I had to drop was only about another twelve feet, and, letting go my hold, I landed in the long grass beneath almost without a sound.

So far it had been plain sailing, but the next stage was a different matter. In order to reach my objective, I had to cross at least a hundred yards of open ground, every inch of which was in full view of the Schloss. It was so bare as to be almost indecent—a mere expanse of flat turf without so much as a flower-bed or even a solitary shrub.

There was obviously nothing for it except a bold dash, and, since for the time being the coast

appeared to be clear, it struck me that the sooner I set about it the better. I looked up at Fritz, who was peering down at me over the wall, and, waving him farewell, stepped out from beneath the trees. The next moment I was sprinting rapidly towards the house.

As I drew near I saw that alongside the door, and almost directly below Maren's window, there was a small clump of laurels. It was a bit of luck that I had not anticipated, and, making straight for the spot, I crossed a broad gravel walk which ran parallel with the house, and ducked in amongst their friendly shelter.

For perhaps the best part of a minute I crouched there listening intently. There was nothing to be heard except the sound of my own quick breathing, and, satisfied at last that I had reached my goal without being observed, I stole out again and moved towards the creeper.

History relates that when Linnæus, the Swedish botanist, first saw broom, he burst into tears of joy. I did not go quite so far as this, but I must admit that the sight of that matted ivy, with its enormously thick and twisted branches, filled me with an inexpressible pleasure. It looked strong enough to support a successful bookmaker.

Gripping the gnarled stem, and digging my toes in wherever I could find a foothold, I slowly but steadily began to haul myself up. The job was not an easy one, for, besides being half smothered in leaves, I was forced to inhale mouthfuls of gritty and evil-tasting dust, which had evidently been lying there undisturbed since the last fall of rain. Most of the strain, too, came upon my fingers, and although after roughing it for months in South America I was in fairly good condition, it was not long before I could feel little beads of perspiration trickling down my forehead and running into my eyes.

With dogged persistence, however, I clambered up foot by foot, until the stone coping which jutted out below the window was just within my reach. Somehow—heaven must have been responsible—I managed to get my right arm over the sill. By a desperate struggle the other followed, and a moment later I found myself lying there panting and exhausted with the upper part of my body resting on the ledge.

I was looking into a small, empty sitting-room hung round with faded tapestry. It was furnished with a spindle-legged couch, a table, and two or three stiff old-fashioned chairs, while in the opposite corner stood a large gilt mirror. There were

two doors, the one on my right being closed. The other, which was partly open, led into what appeared to be a bedroom.

"Maren!" I said softly. "Are you there?"

"Who is that?" came in a low, startled voice.

"It's Dick Brandon," I said. "I've climbed up the creeper, and I want to have a talk to you."

I heard a faint movement from the adjoining apartment, then the door swung slowly back and a slim figure in white appeared in the opening.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "I got your message, but I couldn't wait till seven o'clock. Things are in a rather awkward way."

With her lips parted and her dark blue eyes wide open, she stood there gazing at me incredulously.

"It *is* you!" she whispered.

"What's left of me," I replied. "May I come inside? It's a bit dangerous chatting through the window."

She made no answer, and, taking silence for consent, I wriggled in over the sill and scrambled to my feet.

"I'm sorry if I've given you a shock," I said. "I suppose I do look a bit disreputable."

As I spoke I glanced at myself in the mirror, and for a moment I was a trifle staggered at my own appearance. My face was smeared with black streaks, while my clothes looked as though I had been sleeping in a ditch. I was certainly a revolting object to burst into a girl's bedroom.

By a magnificent effort Maren seemed to recover her self-control.

"It's all right," she whispered, "only please come away from the window. I am just going to put on a dressing-gown."

She vanished silently, and, creeping forward on tiptoe, I seated myself in the nearest chair. After a few seconds she reappeared in the doorway—a dainty and slender vision in a blue silk kimono.

"Oh, Maren," I said simply, "you don't know how glad I am to see you again."

She made a quick warning gesture with her hand. "You must speak very quietly; there are servants in the house, and they may be awake." She moved towards the couch. "Will you please come and sit here."

I crossed over and took the place beside her.

"I feel as if I must be mad or dreaming," she went on. "You really are Mr. Brandon? It was you who saved Peter?"

"It was," I assured her, "and you'll be happy to hear that he's in the best of health and spirits."

There was a pause.

"But—but it's impossible," she faltered. "How do you come to be in Crutania—how——?"

I leaned forward. "I've come to help you," I said, "but before I can do that I've got to tell you the truth. It isn't easy, and it will take me some time. I want you, if you will, just to sit still and listen."

She nodded gravely. "I will do whatever you wish," she replied.

As briefly and quickly as possible I set about my task. I began by telling her of my meeting with Charles and our encounter with Karl in the Casino, and then step by step I proceeded to describe the whole incredible chain of events which had led up to our escape from the lodge. Jerked out hurriedly in a whisper in the hush of that stilled room, it sounded a most amazing story, but, however astonished and bewildered Maren may have been, she remained absolutely faithful to her promise. It was only her tightly clasped hands and the quick rise and fall of her breast that betrayed the enthralled interest with which she was following every syllable.

"I wish to heaven I'd had the sense to make a clean breast of it that day you came to the Villa d'Or," I finished. "I've probably got you into the most frightful difficulties, and——"

She stopped me with an impulsive movement. "Please," she whispered, "please let me think for a moment. I feel as if the whole world had been turned upside down."

I sat staring at her in tense silence, while the first pale rays of the rising sun stole in through the open window.

"Yes, it must be true. It must be true because it explains everything." She drew in a long breath. "God does sometimes answer one's prayers."

"Listen, Maren," I said. "We haven't much time, and we mustn't waste a minute of it. If there's anything I can do to help you—anything in the world—you've only got to tell me what it is."

My words seemed to have a steady effect on her.

"What I have to tell you won't take me very long." She shivered and drew the thin wrapper a little closer round her. "I am to be married to-day to Ivan. While I was lying in bed last night I made up my mind that if you didn't come I would throw myself out of the window."

"But he can't marry you against your will," I exclaimed.

She laughed softly. "You are an Englishman; you don't understand. In your country you don't breed men like my uncle and Ivan." She pulled back her sleeve, and on the white arm which she held out I saw four livid fingerprints.

"Who did that?" I demanded with an oath.

"Oh, it's nothing. It was merely Ivan's way of showing me who was to be master."

"By God, he shall pay for it!" I muttered savagely. "I——"

"Wait, please. I want to explain. I want you to realise that every word I told you when I thought you were Karl Schönborn was perfectly true. From the very first my uncle has lied to me and deceived me. He pretended that, like myself, all he was thinking about was the good of Crutania. He said again and again that if he could once see her safe and independent he had no further ambition, and he made me believe that it was for this reason, and for this reason alone, that he wished me to marry Ivan." She paused. "I refused at first. I hated Ivan, although he was doing his best to hide from me what he was really like, but then"—her voice

faltered—"then, after that day at the Villa d'Or, I felt that I had no choice."

"It was all my fault," I said bitterly. "I knew what I'd done directly you'd gone."

She shook her head. "You had given your word and you had to keep it. Besides, I don't think it made any difference. I should probably have come here anyhow."

"But when did you find out the truth?" I asked.

"As soon as we had crossed the frontier, my uncle's manner changed completely. I saw at once that all his talk about Crutania had been nothing but the merest sham. He didn't care in the least what happened to the people. His only object was to seize the throne in my name, and then marry me to Ivan. After that he would be able to do as he pleased."

"And you had the pluck to stand up to him?"

"I was too angry to be afraid. I swore that I would have nothing to do with his plan, but he only laughed at me, and said that it would make no difference. I was forced into a car with Ivan and another man—a Captain Kahn—and they brought me down here, where I should be safe and away from my father's friends. Last night Ivan came to see me. He said that he was going away for a few hours, but that he would be back

in the morning and that I was to be married to him this afternoon."

"I can guess where he went to," I said grimly. "Heaven knows how they found out that I was at the lodge, but——" I broke off as somewhere in the house a deep-toned clock began to chime out the hour of five. It brought me to my feet with a jerk. "Tell me," I said, "can we get down to the door and into the grounds without being seen?"

She nodded. "I think so. I don't suppose that any of the servants are about yet."

"You will come?" I whispered. "You will trust yourself to me?"

She rose from the sofa and stood looking up into my face.

"Yes, Dick," she said simply.

The folds of the blue kimono had fallen slightly apart, and for a moment her slender beauty dazed and intoxicated me.

"I love you so," I said hoarsely. "I have loved you from the first moment I saw you."

She stepped back, her face paling and flushing, and then, with a queer little sob, she stretched out her hands towards me.

It was at that moment that my ear caught the faint beat of hooves.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAREN must have heard it also, for she stood there as though turned to stone.

"We are too late. They are coming back."

I took a step forward, and slipped my arm round her shoulder. "Don't you worry," I said. "We'll get away somehow or other."

We listened breathlessly, while every second the sound drew nearer and nearer. Suddenly it ceased, and then the brief silence was broken by a confused stamping and jingling and the murmur of guttural voices.

I could feel Maren's heart beating quickly against mine.

"They are opening the gate," she whispered. "In another minute"—her voice shook—"suppose—suppose Ivan should come up here."

"God help him if he does," I said.

She looked round desperately. "You must hide in my bedroom. When they have gone you can climb down by the creeper, and perhaps later on I may be able to get out into the grounds. If they find you here they will kill you at once." Then, as I hesitated, she caught me by the sleeve. "Please," she begged pitifully, "please, Dick, for my sake."

She pulled me towards the inner room, and, without resisting, I followed her through the doorway. It was an apartment of about the same size as the other—a gloomy, scantily furnished place with an old-fashioned four-poster bed facing the window.

“I don’t believe they’ll interfere with us,” I said. “They’ll probably have some food and then turn in. They must be pretty tired after all their exertions.”

Maren shook her head. “I feel certain that Ivan will insist upon seeing me. He will want to boast to me about what he has done.”

“That will be quite amusing,” I said. “Ask him into the next room, and I’ll sit here and listen. I should like to hear his side of the story.”

Her fingers tightened on my arm. “I can trust you,” she whispered. “No matter what happens, you promise me that you will keep absolutely quiet?”

I looked down at the bruises on her wrist. “As long as he behaves himself,” I said. “If he starts any of that sort of thing——”

She clung to me pleadingly. “No, no ; listen. I am not frightened of him. I don’t care even if

he does hurt me. What does it matter? As long as they don't find you——"

A door banged in the distance, and we both started.

"I'll try to be sensible," I said quietly.

For what seemed an interminable interval we stood straining our ears: then, from the corridor beyond, came a tread of heavy footsteps.

Maren let go my arm, and, with a quick breath, drew the kimono more closely round her. At the same moment someone began rapping loudly at the outer door.

"Are you awake? It is I—Ivan. I want to speak to you."

The sound of that harsh German voice sent the blood tingling to my finger-ends, but Maren's quivering lips and entreating eyes helped me to retain my sanity. I smiled at her reassuringly, and, tiptoeing forward, stationed myself against the wall behind the half-opened door.

Once again the knocking was repeated.

"Come on now. There's nothing to be frightened about. I merely want a few words with you."

She put her hand upon her heart as though to steady its beating.

"Very well, Ivan. Wait one moment and I will let you in."

She gave me a last appealing glance, and then, with a white, set face, she walked out and closed the door behind her.

It may sound a trifle ludicrous, but during the few tense seconds which followed my mind seemed to be wholly occupied with the question as to what would happen if I were to sneeze. As far as I can remember, I was still wrestling with the problem when I heard the grate of a key turning in the lock.

"What is it? Why do you come here at this time?"

Through the thin partition every word was distinctly audible.

"I am sorry if I have woken you out of your beauty sleep. Not that you seem to need it, my dear. You can take it from me that you look most attractive."

There was a half jeering and at the same time a half gloating ring in his voice which made my foot positively ache.

"Will you please answer my question?"

"All in good time. Don't snap at me like that. Remember it's our wedding day." I heard the sofa creak as the speaker apparently seated

himself. "Our wedding day," he repeated, "and, by the living God, I've brought you some news worthy of the occasion." I could almost see the brute swelling out his chest.

"What do you mean?"

"That miserable whelp Karl Schönborn is dead!"

There was a moment's pause.

"Dead!" whispered Maren.

He laughed boisterously. "Dead, and in hell by this time. Listen, and I'll tell you all about it. Two nights ago we got news that he had crossed the frontier and was staying at a house in the forest about twenty miles from Dolgrade. It's a sort of shooting-lodge which belongs to that swaggering idiot Lindenfelt, the fellow they sent to fetch Karl from Monte Carlo. It was evident that he intended to lie up there until Strovno had finished with the Republicans. Well, my father isn't the sort of man to miss a chance like that. He sent me down a party of picked men, and last night, after I left you, we rode through the forest and got there just before midnight. They must have thought they were pretty safe, because they only had one man on guard—an old dodderer with a shot-gun. Rudolf settled him, and then we surrounded the house and tossed in a couple

of fire-bombs. *Himmel!* but you should have seen the place burn! It went up like a bunch of fireworks."

I heard Maren give a well-simulated gasp of horror.

"But how terrible! Do you mean to say that Karl was trapped in the flames?"

"That's so! And a fit ending for the Dolgarian rat. He hadn't the pluck to come out and face his death like a man."

I would have given six weeks of my life to have stepped through the door at that moment, but by a tremendous effort I managed to resist the temptation.

"It was too horrible!" repeated Maren dully. "Who told you that he was there?"

Once again Ivan chuckled exultingly.

"That's the amusing part of it. He had been keeping a girl in Paris—a Dolgarian dancer called Olga Kreisner. According to her account, he had promised to marry her, but when he found out that there was a chance of getting back the throne he gave her the slip and came down to Monte Carlo. She found out the address and followed him. There was an almighty squabble, of course, and the girl, who thought she had been badly treated, swore that she would have her

revenge. One of our men who was watching the villa got into conversation with her and brought her along to us. When we left she took over the job of keeping an eye on Karl, and it was she who sent us a wire saying that he and Lindenfelt had left for Vienna. From that moment the fool was at our mercy."

So it was Olga who had betrayed me! For the second time I was beginning to curse Karl inwardly, when Maren's voice suddenly broke the silence.

"I think it was a crime," she said deliberately; "a stupid and hideous crime. Even if we gain anything by it——"

"Gain anything by it!" he interrupted. "Why, it settles the whole business. Strovno is finished. There is no one else he can put forward who has a shadow of a claim to the throne. If the two countries are to remain united, you are the only possible choice."

"Did you come here merely to tell me this?"

"No!" I heard a jingling of spurs as he got up from the sofa. "I came to tell you that our wedding must take place at once. Now that Karl is dead, I shall be wanted at headquarters. I leave here in three hours' time, and we must be married before I start."

"Married!" repeated Maren. "At this hour in the morning? But it's impossible!"

"Not in the least. The good monk who is in charge of our little forest chapel has already received his instructions. I stopped on our way back and told him of the change in our plans. He will be waiting for us there at seven o'clock. Rudolf will come with us and will act as witness."

There was a pause.

"And what if I refuse?"

He laughed. "I thought you had learned more sense than that. You remember what happened yesterday when you made me angry. I shouldn't try it again if I were you."

Maren's voice remained quiet and steady.

"I am not a child to be frightened by threats. Even in this country such a marriage would not be legal."

"It will be legal enough for my purpose," he retorted brutally. "Father John knows on which side his bread's buttered—don't you make any mistake about that. He'll perform the ceremony, whatever you say or do, and I can promise you that before I leave this house you'll be my wife in something more than name."

I moistened my lips, which had suddenly gone

dry. "I'll kill you for that, you swine," I said to myself.

"I fancy you'll be ready enough to admit that I'm your husband," he continued. "You might find any alternative explanation a trifle awkward." He crossed the room, and the snap of a watch reached my ears. "I'll give you three-quarters of an hour to get dressed. It's no use trying to play the fool with me. If you're not ready then, I'll take you there as you are."

The door opened and banged, and I heard his footsteps echoing along the corridor.

Before Maren had had time to turn the key in the lock, I had already made my decision. It came to me in a flash, as most good ideas do, and, almost staggered by its magnificent simplicity, I stood there awaiting her return.

She stole in, silently as a ghost, and at the sight of her frail, half-child-like loveliness, my hatred for Ivan flamed up afresh.

"That's a nasty thing you've got in the shape of cousins, Maren," I said. "It would give me a lot of pleasure to ram his teeth down his throat."

"You heard what he said?" She came up to me. "Oh, Dick, what are we to do? Is there no way——?"

I drew her into my arms. "Half a dozen
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ways," I whispered, "and the one I'm going to take is the safest and the simplest." I paused. "Now, listen very carefully. Directly I get back to my friends we shall go straight to the chapel. Fritz knows where it is. We shall hide ourselves there and wait until you arrive. There will only be the monk and Ivan and this friend of his, and it won't take us long to settle with them."

Her eyes shone in a sudden gleam of hope and excitement.

"They will be armed. Ivan always carries a revolver."

"I don't care if he carries a machine-gun," I said. "All I want you to do is to come to the chapel and leave the rest to us."

From somewhere in the direction of the forest came the distant notes of a bugle.

"That will be the others on their way back," I added. "I hate leaving you, Maren, but——"

She nodded quickly. "Yes, yes, you must go at once—as soon as I have made sure that there is no one outside."

I drew her still closer, until our lips were almost touching.

"May I?" I whispered. "Just in case things go wrong."

She turned her face up to mine, and, regardless

for a moment of everything else in the world, we kissed each other recklessly and passionately. Then with a little gasp she freed herself from my arms.

“Wait—wait there just one instant, and I will tell you if it’s safe.”

With faltering steps she crossed the room, and, having looked out through the open window, beckoned to me to follow her.

“I can’t see a sign of anyone. I think they must all be in the house. Oh, Dick, dear—be careful, be careful, won’t you?”

“I shan’t let go,” I assured her. “I’ve too much to live for.”

She took my hand and pressed it against her heart. “I love you so much,” she whispered almost inaudibly.

It may sound a curious statement to people whose emotions are well under control, but the fact remains that I have very little recollection as to how I accomplished my descent. Possibly—seeing that I was in no fit state to look after myself—my guardian angel was climbing alongside of me and directing my efforts. Anyhow, after what appeared to be an incredibly short space of time I found myself dangling in mid-air just above the bushes, and, without troubling

exactly as to what was beneath me, I released my aching fingers and slithered down thankfully amongst them.

Scratched and breathless, I crouched there on my hands and knees. All seemed quiet, and I was in the very act of rising to my feet when, by the mercy of Providence, a warning rattle suddenly checked me. I ducked down again, and, as I did so, the small door to my left was flung open, and two men stepped out on to the gravel path.

They were so close to me that by stretching out my arm through the shrubs I could certainly have touched them. I heard the leaves actually rustle as the nearer of them brushed past, and then, almost before I had time to realise what a funk I was in, they were strolling away, laughing and talking to each other, in the direction of the front of the house.

Sinking still lower, I peered out under the bottom of the bushes. I could only get a back view of them, but, judging by what I saw, I guessed at once that the bigger of the pair must be Captain Rudolf Kahn, the obliging friend who was to officiate as witness at Ivan's wedding. He was a swaggering, broad-shouldered fellow of the same type as his patron, and, remembering the

ruthless way in which he had shot down poor old Jacob, I stared at his retreating figure with a vindictive hatred. The other, a bull-necked ruffian in a nondescript khaki uniform, had all the conventional cut of a senior non-commissioned officer.

Sauntering along slowly side by side, they reached the end of the path and disappeared round the corner of the house. They were still deep in conversation, and, having waited until the mutter of their voices at last died away, I very cautiously hoisted myself up.

Unless they took it into their heads to turn back, this was my opportunity. It stood to reason that the whole household must be already awake, and the longer I remained in my present hiding-place the more difficult my escape seemed likely to become. Besides, with only an hour in which to make our preparations, every minute was of inestimable value.

I pushed my way through the bushes, and, breaking into a run, set off across the grass. I had a horrible feeling that before I had gone five paces someone would shout to me to stop, but, unpleasant as the sensation was, it at least served a useful purpose. It acted, indeed, as such a tonic to my exhausted energies that I believe I

covered the distance at an even quicker pace than I had done before.

I was still about twenty yards from the wall when I caught sight of Fritz. He was crouching in the fork of the tree like some giant ape, and as I stumbled on, with my heart pounding against my ribs, I saw him crawl out along the bough and let down the rope.

"Can you manage it, sir?" he whispered.

I pulled up and drew in a long, gasping breath.

"I hope so," I replied.

Summoning my aching muscles to a final effort, I hauled myself up foot by foot until I reached the branch. Then a strong hand gripped me by the coat collar, and after a desperate wriggle I found myself being dragged forward on to the top of the wall. Despite a few remnants of broken glass, it seemed to me a most pleasant and comfortable resting-place.

"Wait a moment till I get in the rope, sir. Then I shall be able to help you."

I clutched hold of the bough above, and smiled at him reassuringly.

"Don't you worry about me, Fritz," I said. "I can look after myself all right."

He turned back to unhitch the rope, and,

hoisting my legs sideways over the coping, I embarked a little unsteadily on my downward journey.

Charles, who was standing at the foot, caught me in his arms as I slithered from the bottom branch.

"You've been a hell of a time, Dick," he said. "I was beginning to feel quite worried about you."

I held on to him tightly.

"Have you got any of that brandy left?" I asked.

He produced the bottle from his pocket and extracted the cork.

"Only a spot. I kept it to drink your girl's health."

I tilted the neck to my lips, and, as I gulped down the last drop, Fritz with the rope on his arm landed lightly beside us.

"Anything doing?" inquired Charles.

I tossed away the empty bottle.

"Just a little," I said. "Come into the wood and I'll tell you all about it."

CHAPTER XIX

FRITZ looked back over his shoulder.
“ We’re in plenty of time, sir. No one has arrived yet.”

I crept forward to where he was lying and peered out through the straggling undergrowth. Just below us, in the centre of a small glade, stood a roughly built wooden chapel. It was a tiny, picturesque place, shut in by a low fence, the enclosed space being almost knee deep in grasses and weeds. From the gate facing us a narrow path led up to the door.

“ Which direction are they likely to come from ? ” I asked.

He pointed to the left, where a neglected-looking bridle track disappeared amongst the trees.

“ There’s no other way of getting here,” he answered. “ They will have to turn off the road about half a mile from the lodge.”

I knelt up and took a rapid but comprehensive survey of the field of action. Only a steep bank and a narrow strip of open ground separated us from the gate, and anyone approaching it would be bound to pass within a few yards of where we were hiding.

"It's a choice of two things," I said. "We must either stop here or else climb over the fence and lie up in the long grass."

Fritz shook his head. "I think we had better stay where we are, sir. We can see them coming from here, and we shall know how many we have to reckon with."

I turned to Charles, who had crawled up alongside of us.

"What's your opinion?" I asked.

"I agree with old Fritz," was his answer. "This is as good a place as we could possibly find. Let 'em alone until they're right underneath us, and then jump down and lay them out."

"Very well," I said. "Provided there's only Ivan and that fellow Kahn it ought to be a fairly simple job. They'll be armed, of course, but I don't fancy they'll have much time for shooting, not unless we bungle things pretty badly."

Charles pulled out the spanner from his pocket, and gave it a tentative swish through the air.

"I wish I had my heavy niblick," he remarked a little sadly.

"Supposing the monk arrives first," inquired Fritz. "Do you think it would be advisable to deal with him separately?"

"Have you any scruples in the matter?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "None at all, sir. As far as my religious beliefs are concerned, I am more or less in sympathy with the late Mr. Herbert Spencer."

"That saves a lot of trouble," I agreed. "All the same, if Father John should happen to turn up in front of the others, my own idea is that we oughtn't to interfere with him. When they see that the chapel door's open it will put them off their guard."

"What's the programme exactly?" demanded Charles. "We'd better have it all cut and dried or we may get in each other's way."

"It depends on how many they are," I said. "If there are only two of them, I'll tackle Ivan while you go for the other chap. Fritz will act as the reserve, and if either of us is getting into trouble he can weigh in and give us a hand."

"It's your girl I'm thinking about," said Charles. "This is going to be a pretty rough house while it lasts, and as far as I can see she'll be slap in the middle of it."

"It's worrying me just a little," I remarked. "Still, I've great faith in Maren's nerve. She's

expecting something of the sort to happen, so——”

“Hst !”

The sudden warning from Fritz reduced me to an instantaneous silence. His sharp ears had caught a sound which had escaped both of us—the faint clip-clop of a horse’s hooves approaching along the main roadway.

With a simultaneous movement we all three sank down out of sight. I had only a scraggy low-growing bush in front of me, and by parting the leaves with my hands I was able to command a bird’s eye view of the whole glade.

For perhaps a couple of minutes we lay there as still as death. Then the clatter of hooves, which had been growing louder, came to a sudden stop. Whoever the rider might be, he had apparently turned off on to the grass, and, flattening ourselves still closer, we stared expectantly down the bridle-path.

Some fifty yards distant, at a point where it twisted away to the left, the man we were waiting for ambled into view. He was an extraordinary figure—a tall, gaunt vision in a black cassock, seated astride of a stout pony, his long legs sticking out grotesquely on either side. In that lonely forest track, with the sun flickering down

on him through the trees, he looked like some incredible survivor from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

At a slow trot, which was about all the fat pony seemed capable of, he jogged steadily forward until he reached the opening into the glade. Here he halted, and, swinging himself out of the saddle, proceeded to tether his mount to a neighbouring branch.

While he was engaged in this operation, the cowl which he wore over his shaven head slipped back on to his shoulders, and for the first time I was able to get a clear sight of his face. It was a nasty face—sallow, furtive, and cruel—with high cheek-bones and a long underhung jaw. Apart altogether from his professional misconduct I felt that I had no use for Father John.

Walking stealthily past us like a large black cat, he pushed open the gate. It went back with a rusty creak, and, continuing his way up the narrow path which led to the chapel, he produced a bunch of keys from under his cassock and let himself in.

As the door closed behind him Charles gave a disapproving grunt. "What a horrible mug!" he whispered. "I wonder if his mother ever kissed him."

"I shouldn't think so," I said; "not unless it was in mistake for the dog."

He laughed noiselessly. "Well, it eases my conscience, anyhow. There can't be anything very sacrilegious in bashing in a face like that."

Fritz, who was crouching a few feet away, wriggled a little closer.

"I've got an idea, sir. I think after all it would be better if I crossed over and hid myself in the grass. When they arrive, I can make a noise of some sort and attract their attention. They will be sure to turn in my direction, and that will give you your chance."

Charles looked at him admiringly. "It's a brain-wave," he muttered.

"Absolutely," I agreed. "The only danger is the monk. Suppose he happens to open the door just as you get to the gate?"

"I shall have to knock him down and tie him up in the chapel, sir. I have brought the rope with me, so there will be no difficulty about that."

As he spoke he picked up the coil which was lying alongside of him, and rose to his feet.

"Go along then, Fritz," I said. "It's a pity you couldn't change places with Karl: you'd

have made a lot more successful king than either of us."

He took a pace forward, and, lowering himself swiftly and silently down the bank, darted away across the open. He ran like a greyhound, and, with one eye on him and the other on the chapel door, Charles and I watched and waited. Under our breath we were both measuring the distance. Fifteen—ten—five yards to go, then he was through the gateway; another second and the long grass had swallowed him up.

With a sigh of relief I shifted over on my side.

"He's a stiff-built swine, this fellow Kahn, Charles," I whispered. "If you don't lay him out with the first whack he may give you a bit of trouble."

He nodded. "How about our friend Ivan? He'll be a tough handful, and you haven't even got a spanner."

"I don't want a spanner," I said. "What I'm looking forward to——"

I paused. Above the chirping of the birds and the faint rustling of the leaves, a low sound came droning through the forest. It was the distant but unmistakable hum of an approaching car.

"That's them," said Charles complacently. He threw away the unlighted cigarette that he

was chewing and crawled a little closer to the bank. "Pity we can't have the wedding march," he added. "It's one of my favourite tunes."

Now that the fateful moment was so close at hand, I felt surprisingly cool and steady. There was still a dull ache in my arms and fingers, but apart from that I had more or less recovered from my exertions. The thought of settling accounts with Ivan filled me with an unspeakable satisfaction, and, crouching low behind the straggling undergrowth, I again glued my eyes on the bend in the path.

We had not long to wait.

Suddenly, with remarkable friskiness in so sedate an animal, the monk's pony flung up his head and shied violently to one side. In his quiet existence motor-cars were evidently something of a novelty, especially when they left the road and came careering at one across country. Held fast by the reins, he continued to make wild but futile plunges, and then, curiously out of place in such surroundings, a large, dark blue, six-cylinder limousine lumbered into sight.

It came on, bumping its way over the uneven grass, and pulled up just clear of the trees. As it halted, I saw through the glass screen that Kahn was at the driving-wheel. The seat next him

appeared to be empty, and I was noting the fact with considerable thankfulness when the tonneau door swung open and Ivan himself stepped out into the glade.

He crossed over to the frightened pony, and, catching it by the rein, reduced it instantly to a state of peace. While he was doing so, Maren and Kahn emerged from the car, and almost at the same moment the sinister figure of the monk appeared in the chapel porch.

With that swaggering, truculent gait of his, Ivan sauntered back to where the others were standing.

"So," he remarked in his guttural German. "I am glad to see that the good father is ready for us. We ardent lovers do not like to be kept waiting."

Kahn laughed brutally.

"Priests have their uses," he observed.

"Remember!" Ivan turned suddenly and gripped Maren by the wrist. "In a few minutes you will be my wife. It is no use your behaving foolishly. If you do, you will only pay for it later."

Maren made no answer. Watching her through the leaves, I saw that her face was contorted with pain, and the fury that surged up in me seemed to scorch my heart.

Ivan jerked at her roughly.

"Come along. We have no time to waste over this foolery."

He took a step forward, pulling her with him, and at that instant a demoniacal yell rang out from inside the gate.

Both men stopped as if struck by a bullet, and with a simultaneous movement Charles and I sprang to our feet. I saw Maren wrench herself free from Ivan's hold, and then, clearing the bush with a flying leap, I landed on the grass exactly behind him.

He swung round to meet me, snatching for his revolver, but, before he could pull it out, I drove home a smashing right which caught him fair and square on the mouth. Down he went, rolling over on to his side, and, with the blood spurting from my knuckles, I flung myself on top of him.

Even now I am not sure how it happened. I remember grabbing his arm as he made another desperate effort to get at his weapon, and then from somewhere beneath me came a sudden deafening report. He gave a convulsive spring and a half-choking cry. The hand that was clutching at my throat let go its grip, and with a long, trembling shudder the huge body fell limply back.

Dazed and a little stupefied, I knelt there staring down at him. All the colour had left his face, and just below his heart a dark patch was spreading slowly across the grey uniform.

His open mouth, with its bruised and swollen lips, seemed to be grinning at me like some hideous mask.

I wrenched my eyes away from the sight, and, stumbling to my feet, looked hastily about me. The battle appeared to be over. A few yards to my right Charles was just getting up off the prostrate body of Kahn, while Fritz, with a spanner in his hand, had already turned in my direction. Of Father John I could see nothing.

There was a light footfall on the grass behind me, and the next moment Maren was in my arms.

"You are not hurt? Tell me you are not hurt!"

I kissed her reassuringly. "I've cut my knuckles," I said, "but I'm getting used to that."

"And Ivan?"

I shook my head. "Ivan is dead. He shot himself with his own revolver."

She looked down at the distorted features, and then, with a slight shiver, she suddenly averted her face.

"It is dreadful," she whispered. "He was not fit to die."

"He certainly wasn't fit to live," I objected. I drew her a little to one side, and, bending down, kissed her again. "Wait here just one moment," I said. "I want to make sure what's happened to the others."

Sucking the blood from my injured hand, I walked across to where Fritz and Charles were standing. It was the latter who was the first to speak.

"Quite a successful effort!" he observed. "I hope the blighter didn't damage you?"

"Not in the least," I said. "He tried his best, but all he managed to do was to shoot himself through the heart." I glanced at the motionless figure of Kahn. "You seem to have made a pretty good job of it," I added.

Charles fingered his throat tenderly. "It was hot enough while it lasted. That sleeping beauty is a bit of a scrapper. I'm not at all sure I wasn't beginning to get the worst of it, but just at the critical moment old Fritz toddled up and whanged him on the head with a spanner. Since then he's been as good as gold."

"Where's the monk?" I demanded.

He pointed towards the gate. "That's him. The black thing squirming about in the grass."

"I'm afraid I'm responsible, sir," interrupted Fritz a little apologetically. "When the trouble started he came rushing out of the chapel with a stick in his hand. He looked as if he meant mischief, so I hit him in what they call the solar plexus. I fancy I must have taken his wind."

"Well, we'd better tie him up before he gets it back," I suggested. "Otherwise he may do a bolt."

We all three moved towards the enclosure, and as we approached him Father John succeeded in scrambling to his feet. He was still panting for breath, and his face was the colour of dirty parchment.

I stepped forward in advance of the others.

"Good morning, father," I said in German.

"I hope this will be a lesson to you."

He glared at me like a trapped wolf.

"We are going to tie you up nice and tight," I continued, "and leave you here to look after the others."

"Murderer!" he gasped. "Murderer and blasphemer! Do you dare to commit this outrage on a priest?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I am sorry," I said, "but if the Church will persist in being

militant here on earth it must put up with the consequences."

He opened his mouth to reply, but, without giving him time for any further anathemas, I seized him round the waist and deposited him unceremoniously on his back. Charles plumped down heavily on top of him, while Fritz, who had already retrieved the rope, proceeded with scientific thoroughness to pinion his arms and legs.

I waited with some impatience until the process was completed.

"That ought to keep him out of mischief for a bit," I remarked. "Now come along and be introduced to Maren."

They followed me across to where she was standing.

"Maren darling," I said, "this is Charles and this is Fritz. Nobody on God's earth ever had two such good pals."

With shining eyes she looked from one to the other of them.

"If only I knew how to thank you," she whispered.

"But there's no need to," said Charles. "As far as I'm concerned it's been all pure pleasure."

Fritz made a deep obeisance.

"I am greatly honoured that I should have had the privilege of assisting your Highness."

"That's what I meant," added Charles, "only I couldn't put it quite so neatly."

"What do you think, Fritz?" I asked. "Shall we get back to the launch, or shall we take the car and make a dash for it?"

He answered without hesitation. "I should advise the launch, sir. If we try the road we are almost certain to be stopped. We can get down by water as far as the frontier, and once we are on Austrian territory we shall be out of danger. The chief risk will be in passing the boat-house."

I nodded. "That's what I was thinking of. If Strovno has heard about the burning of the lodge——"

"We've got to risk something," interrupted Charles. "After all, Strovno still believes in you, and supposing we do run into anyone, it will only be a crowd of good-natured lads who are thirsting to make you king. That will be a lot healthier than being held up by any of Stefanoff's gang. After what we've done to his son and heir——" He broke off with an eloquent gesture.

"I suppose he might be a little peevish," I

agreed. I slipped my arm through Maren's. "Come along then," I added. "We'll postpone our thanksgivings till we're safely on board."

CHAPTER XX

"DO you know where we are now?" inquired Charles.

I pulled out my watch and looked at the time.

"I'm not certain," I said, "but I fancy we must be getting somewhere near the danger zone." I leaned forward. "How do you make it, Fritz?" I asked. "About a mile from here to the boat-house?"

He glanced round from the steering-wheel.

"Something like that, sir. We've certainly been travelling faster than we did coming up."

Maren stared ahead with troubled eyes. "Do you think there'll be anyone there?" she asked.

"It's not likely," I said as cheerfully as I could. "There's hardly been time yet for the news to get to Dolgrade."

"There are all sorts of things I still want to know about," broke in Charles, with the obvious intention of diverting her mind. "That day you

came to our place, for instance. How did you find out that your uncle was trying to murder Karl? He surely wasn't such a chump as to take you into his confidence?"

"No," she said with a little smile. "He has many faults, my uncle, but he is not—what was the word you used?—a 'chump.'" She paused. "It was quite by accident that I discovered the truth. The night before, just when we had finished dinner, a man called at the villa. Ivan had gone to the Casino, and except for the *bonne à tout faire* we were alone in the house. I was not curious. My uncle had many visitors, and they often came at late hours. At ten o'clock I went into the garden to get some air. I was sitting there in the dark, looking at the sea, when my uncle and this man came out on to the verandah. I could not help overhearing them. They were talking about Karl Schönborn, and before they had said more than a few words I knew that they were planning to murder him."

"Jolly sort of thing to have sprung on one suddenly," said Charles. "What did you do?"

"I sat quiet and listened. When they had gone back into the house I made up my mind that next day I would warn Karl of the danger he was in."

Charles looked at her admiringly. "Yet there are some fools who say that girls can't play the game!" He paused. "Wasn't it a bit of a shock to you when Dick opened the gate?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I was prepared for the likeness. My uncle had already told me about it. You see, he had to explain why he and Ivan had behaved so strangely that day at the villa."

"When did you hear that Chaulieff was dying?" I asked.

"As soon as I got back," was her answer. "The doctor who had been attending him was in my uncle's pay. A message from him had just arrived, and they had already made arrangements to start for Crutania next morning. After what had happened I was quite willing to go with them. I believed that all the bad things I had heard about Karl were true, and that it was my duty to do whatever I could for my father's country." She turned to me. "Then I thought of you, Dick. Somehow you seemed to be the only friend I had, and I felt that I couldn't go away for ever without saying good-bye to you. So I wrote you that letter, and when I had finished it I walked up to the road and stopped a peasant who was driving by in a cart. I gave him fifty

francs, and he promised that he would leave it for me at the Moderne. I wasn't sure whether you would get it: I thought that he would probably take the money and throw away the note."

"Thank God he didn't," I exclaimed gratefully. "If it hadn't been——"

I was interrupted by a sudden exclamation from Fritz.

"I know where we are now, sir. I remember nearly running aground on that mud flat last night." He altered his course a shade closer to the bank. "We shall be in sight of the boat-house in another five minutes. It's just round the bend, in amongst those trees."

There was a brief silence.

"Let's have a bet," suggested Charles. "I'll lay you an even fiver that we get through without being stopped."

I shook my head. "Nothing doing," I said. "I've no wish to make money: at least, not in that particular way."

Edging up close to me, Maren slipped her hand into mine, and with all our hearts, I fancy, beating a trifle quicker than usual, we drove on steadily towards the fateful point.

As we approached the curve I felt Maren's fingers tighten. Without speaking, I gave her

an encouraging squeeze, and then, just as the tension seemed to be growing almost unbearable, we shot out into full view of the next reach.

It was too late to turn back even if we had attempted to do so. There, not a couple of hundred yards ahead of us, stood the boat-house. Alongside of it a big petrol launch, twice the size of our own, was in the very act of pushing off from the shore. It was crowded with soldiers, and amongst them, conspicuous even at that distance for his martial bearing, I recognised the spruce figure of Colonel Lindenfelt.

For a moment I felt as if someone had dropped a handful of ice inside my waistcoat.

"You'd have lost your bet, Charles," I said. "Perhaps that will teach you not to gamble."

Maren sat very still, her face set and white.

"Who are they?" she whispered.

"It's Lindenfelt—our late host," I answered. "He has evidently come out from Dolgrade to look for us."

Fritz throttled down his engine, and turned towards me with an inquiring glance. As usual, he seemed to be wholly unperturbed.

"I suppose we shall have to stop, sir. It

doesn't seem to me as if we had any choice in the matter."

Already I could see plainly enough that we had been recognised. The big boat in front of us had ceased moving, and amid a hubbub of excitement Lindenfelt was hastily forcing his way forward into the bows.

"Take her straight up alongside," I said.

Charles crossed his legs and leaned back against the thwart. "What's the scheme?" he inquired coolly.

"There's no scheme," I answered. "The King has been found—that's all." I released Maren's hand. "Keep steady," I whispered, "and back me up in whatever I say."

How to account for her presence in the boat I had for the moment not the remotest notion. That it would need quite a lot of accounting for, however, was distressingly clear, and I was rack-ing my brains vainly in the search for a solution when a sudden wild roar of cheering broke out from the launch.

"Der König! Der König!"

Waving their caps and jostling each other in their enthusiasm, the excited soldiers crowded to the rails. I saw Lindenfelt spring ashore, and heard him rap out some hoarse and unintelligible

order, and then, as I raised my hand in a gracious acknowledgment, we swung in towards the landing-stage and bumped lightly alongside.

Hastening forward, Lindenfelt assisted me up on to the wooden planking.

"God be thanked, sir!" he exclaimed fervently. "I cannot express my joy at seeing your Majesty safe and well."

"It has certainly turned out better than it might have done," I admitted. "I am sorry now that I didn't listen to your advice."

His face flushed. "I wish to heaven you had, sir. It was sheer madness to leave you without a guard."

I shrugged my shoulders. "One could hardly expect such devilry, even from our friends the Crutanians." I paused. "You have been to the house?" I added. "You have seen their work?"

"I have just come from there. I was with the general at the Presidency this morning when a peasant brought in the news. He could tell us nothing except that the place had been burned down. Even now——"

"Oh, it was simple enough," I interrupted. "We were attacked at midnight by a party of fifty men under the command of Ivan Stefanoff.

They shot Jacob, who was out in the grounds, and surrounded the house. We escaped by the underground passage and managed to get away in the launch. Since then we have been hiding ourselves up the river."

He stared past me in the direction of Maren, and, as I saw the unspoken question framing itself on his lips, a desperate inspiration suddenly occurred to me.

I lowered my voice so as not to be overheard by the soldiers.

"I have got some amazing news for you, Colonel," I said. "The lady you see in the launch is the Countess Maren Stefanoff."

If I had informed him that it was Joan of Arc, his expression could hardly have been more thunderstruck.

"Maren Stefanoff!" he stammered. "But how in the name——"

"We came across her by chance early this morning," I lied coolly. "They had been keeping her a prisoner at the Schloss Brunn and were going to marry her against her will to Ivan. Last night she managed to escape. She had been walking for hours, and was just about at the end of her tether when she caught sight of our boat."

Lindenfelt drew in his breath. "It is colossal—a miracle!" he muttered. "Does she know who you are?"

"I have told her the truth," I said. "I thought it was the best thing to do. It was only because she believed in her uncle that she consented to take part in this business. Now she has discovered that his real motives are entirely selfish she will have nothing further to do with it. Her one wish is to leave the country."

In spite of a strong effort to remain calm, the colonel was obviously bubbling over with excitement.

"But this is an astounding development!" he burst out. "It may alter everything. We must start for Dolgrade without wasting a single moment!"

"How do you propose to get there?" I inquired.

"There are the cars that we came in, sir. They are waiting at the lodge." He glanced at his watch. "In an hour from now we shall be at the Presidency."

I had burned my boats so thoroughly that any attempt at retreat was out of the question. For the moment there was nothing to be done except to fall in with Lindenfelt's proposal, and to trust

to luck and our own wits to extricate us from this fresh and unpleasing dilemma.

I turned towards the launch, where the other three were still in their seats.

"I wish you all to come ashore, please," I said in my most stilted German, and, stepping forward, I offered my hand to Maren.

As she mounted the landing-stage, Lindenfelt, who had moved aside to give some further instructions to his men, advanced hastily to meet us.

"Let me present my good friend Colonel Lindenfelt, Countess," I said. "I have already told him of your escape from the Schloss, and how we were fortunate enough to meet you. Like myself, he is delighted to place his services at your disposal."

Considering what I was springing on her, Maren rose to the occasion splendidly.

"I am fortunate indeed to have met with such friends," she said. "I know Colonel Lindenfelt's reputation as a courteous and gallant gentleman."

With a magnificent gesture the colonel bowed himself almost double.

"May I congratulate your Highness on the brave and honourable step which you have taken. It is the conduct that one would expect from the daughter of Michael Stefanoff."

“Colonel Lindenfelt suggests that we should start for Dolgrade immediately,” I continued. “It is a proposal to which, I confess, I see no alternative.”

Without betraying herself even by the quiver of a muscle, Maren inclined her head.

“I am sure that you know best,” she said simply.

CHAPTER XXI

AT the pace we were travelling conversation seemed to involve a certain amount of risk, but as we drew clear of the forest and the road became a little smoother, I ventured to break the silence.

“We have evidently under-rated Bernstorf,” I remarked. “He must have a big following to give us so much trouble.”

Lindenfelt, who was too occupied to turn his head, grunted scornfully.

“In my opinion,” he said, “Strovno attaches too much importance to the fellow. The force he has collected are a mere rabble of peasants. They will melt away the moment we advance.”

"All the same," I persisted, "it's an awkward business his still being in arms. The general seemed very anxious that everything should be settled before I made my entry into Dolgrade."

"There I agree with him, sir. It is essential that the first reports which are received in France and England should be entirely favourable. Until these vermin are exterminated your Majesty's arrival at the Presidency must remain a secret. At the most it will only mean a delay of forty-eight hours."

"Have the Ministers sent any reply to Strovno's message?" I inquired.

He shook his head. "Only a formal acknowledgment. They will do nothing further until they have had instructions from their Governments."

Taking advantage of a long, straight stretch in front of us, he opened out the car to its fullest extent, and once more I relapsed into silence.

Black as things looked, there was some faint consolation in the feeling that they might be worse. From the news which Lindenfelt had given me on our way up from the boat-house it was obvious that affairs in Dolgrade were in a distinctly chaotic condition. Instead of subsiding

into obscurity, as Strovno had predicted, that enterprising gentleman Mr. Bernstorff was apparently still very much to the fore. Backed by a fresh body of dissentients, whom he had managed to gather round him after his escape, he had established himself in a hilly district somewhere north of the town, and was reported to be opening communications with his fellow-Republicans in Crutania. Abortive as his effort might prove to be, it at least promised to afford us a brief respite. I could still count upon a few precious hours of comparative obscurity, and by some desperate move it might yet be possible to pull the game out of the fire.

I tried to imagine to myself what effect Maren's sensational intrusion upon the scene was likely to produce. It seemed to me that after he had recovered from the first shock, Strovno's attitude was bound to be one of elated approval. Her supposed flight to Dolgrade would rob Stefanoff of all shadow of authority, and the issue would be reduced to a straight fight between our party and the Republicans.

Whether I had acted wisely in revealing her identity was a matter over which it was too late to worry. I had taken the only course I could think of in the circumstances, and, whatever the

result might be, all we could do now was to make the best of it.

I glanced round towards the back seats, where Maren and Charles were sitting. It had been Lindenfelt's own suggestion that we should all three travel with him, and that Fritz and a small bodyguard of soldiers should follow in a second car. Maren smiled at me cheerfully, and, leaning forward with a well-assumed air of deference, Charles addressed me in English.

"How do things look now, your Majesty?" he inquired.

"Colonel Lindenfelt has been quite encouraging," I replied gravely, and, feeling that it would be inadvisable to indulge in any further confidences at the moment, I settled down again into my former position.

The country through which we were now passing bore evident signs of approaching civilisation. Here and there the roofs of scattered farms were visible among the trees, while at increasingly frequent intervals small settlements of roughly built cottages, with the inevitable café in their midst, began to spring up on either side of the road.

Even to a complete stranger it would have been obvious that there was some unusual excitement

in the air. Outside each wine-shop an animated group of peasants were talking and gesticulating to each other. Some carried long-barrelled guns slung across their shoulders, but beyond staring at us curiously as we flashed past in a cloud of white dust, none of them evinced any inclination to meddle with our progress.

Slackening his speed a little as we entered the outskirts of the town, Lindenfelt swung off into a broad tree-lined avenue which terminated abruptly in a couple of immense iron gates. A cordon of soldiers, with rifles in their hands, guarded the road in front of them, while on either pavement, grimly conspicuous in the bright sunshine, squatted an ugly-looking machine-gun.

As we approached, and the officer in command of the party recognised Lindenfelt, he barked out an abrupt order. In the twinkling of an eye a way opened in front of us. The great gates swung slowly back, and, followed by the escorting car, which had kept closely on our heels, we drove in between two massive stone buttresses.

Directly ahead, at the end of the long gravel drive, stood the Presidency. It was a big, handsome building, something in the style of a French château. A gaudy-looking flag, which I

took to be the Dolgarian national emblem, fluttered above its roof, while down below, along the main terrace, were dotted a further array of armed and uniformed men.

We drew up in front of a flight of stone steps, where a stout and important-looking gentleman, with several orders on his chest, was waiting to receive us. He gave a visible start as Lindenfelt, who had got out first, whispered a few words to him, and then, coming forward with an almost obsequious air, he assisted me to alight.

The colonel wasted no time on introductions.

"Baron von Weiser tells me that the general is here, sir. If you will be good enough to accompany me, I will inform him of your arrival."

We mounted the steps, and, leading the way across a lofty entrance-hall, lighted by stained glass windows, he ushered us into a room on the left.

"I will return to your Majesty in a moment," he observed. "It will perhaps be best if I see the general first and explain——"

"By all means," I interrupted. "For my own part, I shall be thankful for a few minutes' rest."

He bowed, and, stepping backwards out of the room, closed the door after him.

There was a brief pause, and then with a

leisurely movement Charles pulled forward a chair for Maren.

"Where the devil are we?" he inquired.

"This is the Presidency," I said. "We've come here to interview Strovno."

He laughed. "Oh, is that all? I thought for a moment that we were in some sort of trouble."

He dropped down on to a neighbouring sofa, and, walking across, I glanced out through the French windows which opened on to the terrace. The nearest sentry was at least a dozen paces away.

"It's not altogether as bad as it looks," I said, coming back to where they were sitting. "If we keep our heads we've still got a chance."

With my eyes fixed warily on the door, I proceeded in a few hurried words to inform them of what I had learned from Lindenfelt. Little as it amounted to, I felt that it would at least produce some faint atmosphere of encouragement, and of all immediate factors in the situation that struck me as being one of the most desirable.

"Perhaps I made a mistake in telling him who Maren was," I concluded, "but as far as I could see it was the only way out of the difficulty. If I had pretended that she was just some strange girl we'd picked up on the bank, there'd have

been no excuse for bringing her along with us."

"I think you did absolutely the right thing," said Charles generously. "As some cove put it, we must either hang together or hang separately."

"It hasn't quite come to that yet," I protested. "After all, they still believe that I'm the King and——"

There was a hasty tread of footsteps outside, followed by a loud tap at the door. Almost simultaneously the handle was jerked round and Lindenfelt appeared on the threshold.

I stepped forward to meet him.

"You have seen the general?" I said.

"I have just left him, sir. He is overjoyed at your escape. If your Majesty and the Countess will honour him with your presence——"

"The Countess?" I repeated.

"That was his request, sir."

Maren rose from her chair with admirable dignity. "But of course," she said quietly, "it will give me great pleasure to meet so distinguished a soldier."

I glanced at Charles.

"You had better wait here," I said in English.

"Then we shall know where to find you."

He bowed stiffly, and, turning back to Lindenfelt, I made a gracious gesture with my hand.

"We are quite ready," I observed.

Side by side we crossed the hall and followed him up the broad staircase, at the top of which a long landing branched off in either direction. Stopping at the first room he came to, he threw open the door, and the next moment I found myself face to face with Strovno.

He was sitting in an armchair at a large table littered with papers. There was a telephone at his elbow, and in place of the field grey uniform in which I had last seen him he was now wearing a black and rather badly cut morning coat. It struck me that he looked more like a successful grocer than ever.

Pushing back his chair and rising ponderously to his feet, he greeted me with a low bow. Then, after one rapid and searching glance at Maren, he favoured her with a similar obeisance.

"I am pleased to be with you again, general," I said. "A few hours ago it seemed a trifle improbable."

He gave an almost imperceptible shrug. "I was wrong, sir," he said bluntly. "I shall never forgive myself for the danger and inconvenience which your Majesty has suffered."

"On the contrary," I said, "I am inclined to think that it has all turned out for the best." I

paused. "Colonel Lindenfelt has told you of our adventure?"

"I have heard everything, sir."

"Then let me present you to the Countess Maren Stefanoff."

He bowed again.

"The Countess," I went on, "has appealed to us for our protection. She has been grossly deceived and ill-treated by the very people in whom she had most reason to trust. I have assured her that she will be received in Dolgrade as a welcome and honoured guest."

I fancied I could detect a faint ironic glint in Strovno's hard eyes.

"It is indeed the truth, sir. With the exception of your Majesty, there is no one whom we could be more glad to see."

Offering my hand to Maren, I escorted her to a chair at the table.

"I am impatient to learn your news, general," I said. "You need not hesitate to speak freely in front of the Countess. She has no ambition to act as a catspaw in her uncle's schemes. All she is concerned about is the safety and happiness of Crutania."

Strovno inclined his head. "Her Highness has set a noble example. As you have doubtless

informed her, sir, the object for which we are working is the good of the country as a whole. The interests of Crutania are as important to us as those of our own nation."

Maren took up her cue instantly. "I have learned much during the last few days," she said in a low, steady voice. "So long as I know that my father's people will be treated with justice, I ask for nothing further."

I saw Lindenfelt stir a trifle impatiently. "You will pardon my interrupting, sir, but there are important matters which your Majesty should hear about at once."

I turned to Strovno. "Well, general?" I said.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR a moment those queerly masterful eyes stared at me out of the fat and hairless face.

"Your Majesty must prepare himself for a somewhat disquieting development. At an early hour this morning I received an official communication from the French and English Ministers. Their replies were practically identical,

and had evidently been drawn up after consultation between the two Governments. In each case their attitude towards the establishment of a monarchy, either here or in Crutania, was distinctly unfavourable."

"It is a piece of insufferable insolence," broke in Lindenfelt hotly. "What right has either France or England to interfere in our internal affairs?"

Strovno looked at him with a scarcely veiled contempt. "Unfortunately," he said, "they have the only right that matters—the right of force."

"One can hardly question the seriousness of the news," I interposed. "To what extent does it affect our position?"

There was a pause.

"Your Majesty shall hear the truth. I will confess frankly that in our original preparations we greatly under-estimated the strength of the Republicans. The fact that Bernstorf has been able to collect a second following amongst the peasants has come to us as an unpleasant surprise. I am not exaggerating the danger, but the suppression of this new outbreak will certainly take time. It may be several weeks before the situation is thoroughly in hand, and even then we

shall still be faced with the question of Crutania."

"What question?" demanded Lindenfelt. "How can Stefanoff persist in his claim now that the Countess will no longer support him?"

"Whatever Stefanoff may do," said Strovno grimly, "it will not alter the fact that Crutania as a whole will remain entirely hostile. Both parties in the country are equally opposed to the establishment of a Schönborn dynasty. In preference to supporting your Majesty, those who are in favour of Her Highness's claims would be more likely to throw in their lot with the Republic."

"So much the worse for them," exclaimed Lindenfelt. "As long as the army is loyal——"

"The army cannot fight the whole of Europe," interrupted Strovno. "Although we have not yet heard from the other embassies, I have no reason for hoping that their replies will be more favourable."

"You are convinced that they will intervene?" I said.

"Perhaps not officially, sir, but there are indirect methods of bringing pressure to bear against which we should be helpless. One cannot, for instance, conduct a campaign without money. In face of the open disapproval of France

and England, it would be impossible for your Majesty to raise a loan."

"Why should that disturb us?" persisted Lindenfelt. "We can requisition what we want in the country. Do you suggest that the Crutans alone——"

"They will not be alone. Nowadays, any movement in opposition to monarchy can count upon the support of Russia. Whatever help they may obtain elsewhere, there will be no lack of volunteers from Moscow."

"Provided you are right, General Strovno," I said, "we seem to be on the verge of a bloody and ruinous civil war."

He spread out his hands in an expressive gesture. "Much as I regret it, sir, that is unquestionably my opinion."

Lindenfelt stepped forward, his face flushed with anger.

"Should His Excellence find the responsibility too alarming, there are others who are ready enough to undertake it."

Strovno remained perfectly unmoved. "If courage were the only quality needed," he replied, "there would be many successful statesmen." He turned to me. "I felt that it was my duty, sir, to inform you of the exact position.

If you are prepared to continue, my life and my sword are at your service. It is for your Majesty to decide."

I stood silent for several seconds while the great and brilliant solution slowly unfolded itself.

"There is only one man who can save this country," I said, "and that man is yourself."

Swift as it was, the sudden gleam which flashed into his eyes told me that my instincts had been right. I took a step towards him.

"General Strovno," I said, "no one on this earth ever had more loyal and true friends than you and Colonel Lindenfelt have shewn yourselves to be. I thank you both from the bottom of my heart. I would accept your offer if I were justified in doing so, but I will not turn Dolgaria into a shambles in order to gratify my own ambition."

"But, your Majesty——" burst out Lindenfelt.

I laid my hand on his shoulder. "Is it too much to ask from others what I am prepared to give myself? Isn't the happiness and safety of our country more to us than anything else in the world?" I turned towards Maren, who with shining, fascinated eyes was staring at me across

the table. "Her Highness has set us the example. Are we to show ourselves less capable of self-sacrifice?"

It was Strovno's voice that answered.

"Your Majesty has but expressed what we all feel in our hearts. The welfare of Cruto-Dolgaria must be our first consideration. If it is your wish, and that of the Countess, that I should undertake this great work——"

Maren rose quickly to her feet.

"I have only one wish—that the people for whom my father died should not be oppressed or misgoverned."

Strovno bowed. "On that point," he said, "your Highness need be under no apprehension."

I walked forward to the table. "For the present at least," I said, "the Republic must continue. We need a strong and wise hand at the helm, and unless all that is best in both countries rallies to the support of General Strovno, we may be forced into the pleasing alternative of choosing between Stefanoff and Bernstorff."

Lindenfelt, who had been standing as though half stunned, at length found his voice.

"As far as I am concerned," he said hoarsely,

“your Majesty’s orders are sufficient. What view my friends may take——” He paused.

“They must be acquainted at once with my decision,” I said. “I will have no more gallant and valuable lives thrown away in this useless struggle.”

“If I might make a suggestion, sir,” insinuated Strovno, “the simplest method would be a joint manifesto signed by yourself and the Countess. Such a pronouncement, coming from the recognised heads of the two Royalist parties, would be bound to exercise a profound influence.”

I remembered that, by the mercy of Providence, I had spent a considerable portion of my leisure time at the villa practising Karl’s handwriting.

“I will give it to you at once,” I said, and, with a prayer for inspiration in my heart, I sat down in the big armchair and picked up the pen in front of me. There was a dead silence, while slowly, and with several pauses for thought, I achieved the following effort.

“TO OUR FRIENDS AND FELLOW COUNTRYMEN

“At this moment when the very existence of Cruto-Dolgaria is at stake, we appeal personally to every loyal and patriotic citizen.

“The first duty of all—no matter to what
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party they belong or what political views they hold—is to assist in preserving the State from the destruction with which it is threatened.

“It is our conviction that in General Strovno the nation possesses the one leader who is capable of guiding it successfully through its present difficulties.

“For this reason we call upon those who have remained loyal to us in the hour of exile to support him unreservedly in the great and arduous task to which he has set his hand.”

I appended a first-class facsimile of Karl's flourishing signature, and, after blotting it carefully, handed it to Maren. She read it through, and with a grave nod of approval wrote her name under mine.

“I think this should be sufficient,” I said to Strovno, “but if there are any improvements you can suggest I am quite willing to consider them.”

He took the paper which I held out to him, and I watched his face with covert anxiety as he slowly perused its contents.

“A most remarkable and ably expressed document, your Majesty!” he observed, looking up at me with a trace of respectful surprise. “I can see no reason for altering a single phrase.”

“You are satisfied that it will achieve its object?”

“With this, sir, and with the support of the army, I have no doubt that my election to the Presidency is practically assured.”

I rose from my chair. I felt that the moment had come to play my last card.

“In that case,” I said, “my work is finished. My presence here can be nothing but a source of embarrassment and weakness. To go back into exile is now the last and only service that the Countess and I can offer to our people.”

With an expression that really went to my heart, Lindenfelt suddenly flung himself on one knee.

“Your Majesty has but to say the word——”

I took him by the hands, and raised him gently to his feet.

“You are my friend,” I said. “Do not make it more difficult for me than it is.”

“Your devotion and loyalty were never more needed than at present, Colonel Lindenfelt,” broke in Strovno. “It is to you that we must entrust the responsibility of escorting His Majesty and Her Highness safely to the frontier.”

With set lips the colonel drew himself up.

“As you will appreciate,” continued Strovno,

"there is no time to be lost. The journey must be accomplished with the utmost secrecy and dispatch. I leave it in your hands to make whatever arrangements you may consider advisable."

Lindenfelt bowed stiffly. "I will do so at once," he said.

"In the meantime," proceeded Strovno suavely, "there is one small matter which it is necessary for His Majesty and I to discuss in private. If your Highness will permit Colonel Lindenfelt to conduct you to the reception-room——"

With perfect composure Maren again rose from her chair.

"I wish you farewell, General Strovno," she said. "You have my best wishes and my prayers."

Not being able to guess what was coming, I waited in somewhat painful suspense until the door had closed behind them. I had a ghastly feeling that the news of Ivan's death must already have leaked out, and that at any moment the telephone bell might suddenly begin to ring.

It was Strovno who opened the conversation.

"I wished to speak to you, sir, on the subject of the Crown jewels. You will remember that when I was at Monte Carlo I informed you that

several pieces of the Royal collection were in the late President's possession."

I nodded. "According to my father's account," I said coolly, "they ought to be of considerable value. What astonishes me is the fact that they haven't been sold."

Strovno smiled. "It is not improbable," he said, "that Chaulieff regarded them as a convenient form of capital. Had he been compelled to leave the country hastily——"

"Where are they now?" I interrupted.

He walked across to the opposite side of the room, and, pulling back one of the square wooden panels, revealed a hidden safe let into the wall. From this he extracted about half a dozen large flat leather cases, and, coming back to where I was standing, deposited his burden on the table.

"I have no doubt," he observed, "that your Majesty will be interested to examine them."

One after another I raised the lids and inspected their contents. In the course of my job, I have learned a good deal about precious stones, and it didn't take me long to realise that Karl's father must have been in a distinct hurry when he considered it necessary to leave such attractive souvenirs behind him. The most seductive of the lot was a seven-pointed star. It was made of

emeralds and rubies, and, apart from the setting, which struck me as being exceptionally fine, I estimated its value at between ten and twelve thousand pounds.

"All these," said Strovno, "as I have reason to know, are unquestionably the property of the Royal family."

For a moment I wondered whether I had heard him correctly.

"You are not suggesting," I said, "that I am at liberty to take them with me?"

He bowed. "It is a matter which I will leave to your Majesty. I will not disguise the fact that the sum for which they could be sold would be of immense assistance in establishing the new Republic, but——" He paused.

"But unfortunately," I said, "you happen to be a soldier and a man of honour."

I looked again at the tempting array of gems, and a happy compromise suggested itself.

"I will take this star," I said, picking it up. "It is one to which my father was particularly attached." I shut the case and slipped it in my pocket. "For the remainder," I added, "make what use of them you think best."

There was a timid knock from the adjoining room, and with a word of apology Strovno

walked over to the door. He stood there for a moment engaged in a muttered conversation, and then, dismissing the interrupter, he came back to the table.

“Baron von Weiser informs me, sir, that a dispatch has just been received from the Spanish Minister. It is of the same character as the replies from France and England.”

I nodded briefly, and, turning to a chair where I had placed them, picked up the cap and cloak with which Lindenfelt had provided me.

“Your time is of the utmost value,” I said. “I should be doing a poor service to my country if I detained you from her affairs.”

“But I beg you, sir! It may be some little while——”

“You have better ways of employing yourself than in entertaining me,” I persisted. “That unimportant duty can be left to the Countess and Captain Grant.” I offered him my hand.

“Your Majesty will at least permit me to accompany you to the reception-room?”

I shook my head smilingly. “It is easier to say good-bye here,” I replied.

For a moment the genuine but somewhat incompatible emotions which occupied the general’s breast appeared to be struggling for the

mastery. Then, almost regretfully, he leaned forward and raised my fingers to his lips.

"Had it been possible, sir, I should have regarded it as the greatest privilege of my life to work under your Majesty."

I looked down at him gratefully.

"You have done your duty, General Strovno," I said, "and there is no other way in which you could have served me better."

With the exception of a sentry standing motionless in the outer porch, the big hall was entirely deserted. I descended the last three stairs, and, walking across to the door facing me, tapped on the panel.

After a brief delay it was opened cautiously by Charles. At the sight of me his face lit up like a shop window.

"What a pleasant surprise!" he exclaimed softly. "I thought it was that ass Lindenfelt."

I stepped in quickly, and, closing the door, took a hasty glance round. As I did so, Maren, who was sitting at the table, jumped up from her chair and darted towards me.

"Dick!" she whispered.

"It's all right," I said reassuringly. "Has Charles heard the glad news?"

"She was just telling me." He took a pace forward and patted me on the shoulder. "Genius!" he added, "sheer genius! You may be a rabbit at golf, but you're plus six at this sort of thing!"

"We're not entirely out of the wood yet," I warned him. "If anything were to come through about our scrap at the chapel——" I broke off. "I hope to God Lindenfelt will hurry up with those cars," I finished.

"He's gone off to see about them," said Charles. "The poor mutt's nearly sobbing. I never saw a chap look so cut up in my life."

"What was it that the general wanted to talk to you about?" asked Maren.

"This," I said. I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out the star. "It's part of what's left of the Crown jewels," I explained. "He'd have let me take the whole lot if I'd insisted, but after the handsome way he's behaved——"

"My aunt—that's a beauty!" broke in Charles. "How much is it worth?"

"Well, I'm not really an expert," I said, "but I should put it down at about ten thousand."

He whistled softly. "You don't mean to send it to Karl?"

"Certainly not," I said. "He'd only pawn it,

and spend the money on women." I tilted my glittering trophy so that the light showed up its full beauty. "I'm going to divide it equally between all four of us," I continued. "In my opinion this job has been grossly underpaid."

"I shall give Maren my share as a wedding present," announced Charles. "It will be a nice little extra to start housekeeping on."

She shook her head. "I don't want it. I haven't told you, Dick"—she hesitated—"but, as a matter of fact, I have quite a lot of money of my own."

"That's splendid," said Charles. "You'll be able to go and stay at Le Touquet."

I snapped the case and restored it to my pocket.

"The first place we're going to," I observed, "is Monte Carlo. We must certainly pick up Peter before we do anything else."

Maren smiled happily. "Oh," she said, "won't he be pleased to see us again!"

"After that," I went on, "Charles will drive us to Calais, and we'll cross over to England and be married at once." I looked at him inquiringly. "I suppose you are cured, aren't you, Charles?" I asked.

"Cured!" he repeated. "Why, I'd take on Bobby Jones and——"

Exactly what he intended to do with that incomparable player I never heard, for in the middle of his answer there was a loud and hurried knock. The next instant Lindenfelt appeared in the doorway.

"The cars are ready, sir," he said, addressing himself to me. "Perhaps your Majesty and the Countess would like something to eat before setting out on your journey?"

"I think," I said quite truthfully, "that it would be wiser if we started at once."

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From where he had pulled up, just clear of the forest, the road ran curving and shelving downwards to the broad valley of the Ibar. Half a mile below us I could see was the bridge, while beyond that the rugged cliffs of the Austrian frontier towered up majestically against the blue and cloudless sky.

With sombre courtesy Lindenfelt assisted Maren to alight, and then, in a silent group, we all three walked forward to the second car where Charles and Fritz were awaiting our arrival.

The colonel cleared his throat.

"My duty is completed, sir," he said huskily. "Your aide-de-camp has the necessary pass, and

it only remains for me to wish your Majesty God-speed."

We stepped up into our seats, Charles taking his place at the steering-wheel.

"Good-bye, Lindenfelt," I said. "It is not easy to part for ever from one's best friends."

"From this moment, sir," he replied, "I live for one thing only. I am convinced that some day your Majesty will return."

"It is possible," I said gravely.

Then, as the car suddenly jerked forward, and Austria and freedom slid towards us, I turned to Maren.

"But not probable," I added.

THE END

